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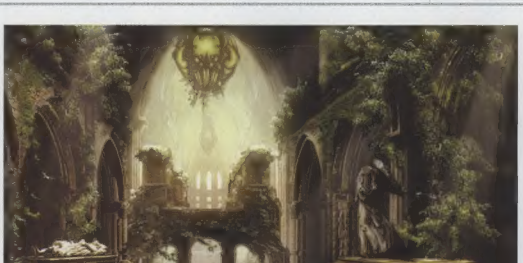

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JOSEPH LAUDATI
IN DARKNESS IT DWELLS
Only Stephen Parrish and his daughter Julie know of the ancient evil awakened in their little town. . .

JOSEPH LAUDATI

IN DARKNESS IT DWELLS

Teen-aged filmmaker Tom DeFrank, through his hobby of stop-motion photography, conceives a monster: he builds and animates a demon puppet. Unbeknownst to Tom, however, the "toy" creates a subliminal bond with a dark entity. As he labors with the miniature beast, making his movie, the boy unwittingly summons a force that wreaks the terrible vengeance of Tom's repressed rage.

Only reclusive psychic Stephen Parrish and his daughter Julie know of the ancient evil awakened in their little town. As romance blooms between the teens, Parrish senses the strange presence within the troubled young filmmaker and seeks to unravel the mystery of the demon.

But people are dying as bitter grudges come to the fore. Rumors abound of a strange creature loose in the countryside, and a fearful public turns suspicious on Parrish. Will he be able to leash the monster and the will of its creator – a boy little conscious of his power to create ... or destroy?

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contributors

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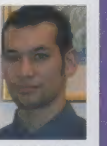
TOM KIDD (right) has worked for a number of publishers, including illustrating *The Three Musketeers* (1998, William Morrow), and *The War of the Worlds"* (2001, Harper Collins) In addition, there are two books of his art, *The Tom Kidd Sketchbook* (1990, Tundra) and *Kiddography: The Art & Life of Tom Kidd* (2005, Paper Tiger). A gallery featuring this book appeared in the April '06 issue of *Realms of Fantasy*. Tom Kidd has also done design work for film, theme parks, entertainment products, and all types of conceptual design work for such clients as Walt Disney, Rhythm & Hues and Universal Studios. His work has been displayed in a wide array of venues, including The Delaware Art Museum, The Society of Illustrators and the Science Fiction Museum & Hall of Fame. His art has won him a World Fantasy Award (Best Artist 2004) and six Chesley Awards. His favorite and most time-consuming obsession is a unpublished book called *Gnemo: Airships, Adventure, Exploration*. This is the sort of stuff that makes him happy. His website is: www.spellcaster.com/tomkidd.

PATRICE SARATH (left) is a writer and editor in Austin, Texas. She has sold stories to various science fiction and fantasy publications, including *Black Gate, Beyond the Rose, Such a Pretty Face,* and *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*. When she isn't writing fiction, she writes business articles and marketing copy for one of the last dot-coms in existence. She is married with two children.

JIM C. HINES began his writing career with an award-winning tale in *Writers of the Future XV*. His work has since appeared in *Sword & Sorceress, Turn the Other Chick, Fantastic Companions,* and many others. His novel *Goblin Quest* was recently released by Five Star Books.

RUTH NESTVOLD lives and works in Germany where she translates and tests computer programs. She spent several years in academia, but decided to write speculative fiction instead of literary criticism and has since sold short stories to *Asimov's, Strange Horizons, Marsdust, Andromeda Spaceways,* and *NFG*. On occasion, she maintains a website at: www.ruthnestvold.com



As a boy, **ERIC FORTUNE** (right) began drawing robots and weapons based on his favorite comic book and cartoon heroes. Eric decided to pursue his interest by enrolling in the Columbus College of Art and Design and was one of only three students to be featured in *Spectrum 6: The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art*. "The Shadow Thieves" and "Tales from the Brothers Grimm and Sisters Weird" are two pieces that were recently featured in the 2006 Society of Illustrators juried show. Eric has also been recognized by Blue Cube, and he was presented with Best of Show two years in succession for the Art of Illustration competition.

CATHERINE KRAHE (left) has been awarded an honorable mention in the *Dell Magazine* Award for Undergraduate Excellence in Science Fiction and Fantasy Writing for her fiction, a distinction nearly as long as some of her stories. She is a fledgeling mad scientist at Illinois Wesleyan University, where she spends much of her time staring through a microscope or cloning things.

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DEALER INQUIRES ARE WELCOME!

By Resa Nelson

Short stories by Stephen King are brought to life in *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*.

It's a good day on the set of *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*, a new Stephen King miniseries that will air this summer on TNT.

"William Hurt is shooting right now 200 feet from me," says producer Mike Robe (TV's *News at Eleven*). "He just today was nominated for an Academy Award as the Best Supporting Actor for *The History of Violence*."

Nightmares and Dreamscapes is made up of eight hour-long episodes, each of which is based on a short story by Stephen King. The miniseries is named after the collection that contains most of these stories. Hurt (*Lost in Space, Kiss of the Spider Woman*) is the star of "Battleground," the story of a man who battles a boxful of toy soldiers sent on a mission to kill him. It's an episode that relies heavily on visual effects. Thanks to the steady advancement of technology and a generous budget, this episode promises to be chillingly real.

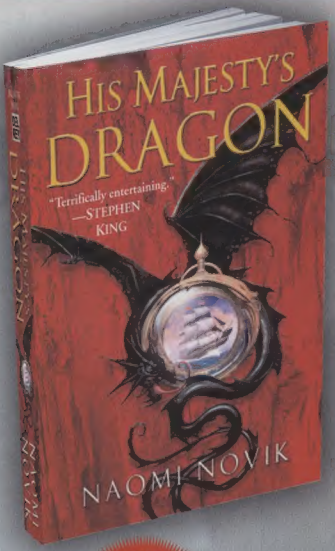
"We're spending a lot more money, frankly, on these one-hour films than a lot of television does," Robe says. "All of the stories work in their own unique way. They're all exciting. They're all different from one another and yet they all feel like the real thing, which is Stephen King at his most provocative and most imaginative."

Since *Carrie* was directed by Brian De Palma 30 years ago, nearly a hundred novels and short stories by Stephen King have been adapted for television and film. *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* came about as the result of the working relationship that executive producer Bill Haber (*Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*) has with King. The filmmakers' goal is to maintain the integrity of the original stories.

"It's the old adage that it all starts with the script," says producer Jeffrey Hayes (TV's *Beastmaster, Star Trek: The Next Generation*). "And when I say 'script,' I mean it starts with the original Stephen King short

In You Know They Got a Hell of a Band, *part of Stephen King's latest miniseries, Kim Delaney and Steven Weber play a young couple visiting a small town in which the encore is the final act.*

"TERRIFICALLY ENTERTAINING."
—Stephen King



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TOP: In You Know They Got a Hell of a Band, *a couple discovers a town named Rock and Roll Heaven. ABOVE LEFT: In* The Fifth Quarter, *Jeremy Sisto plays an ex-con on the treasure hunt of his life. ABOVE RIGHT: Tom Berenger plays a writer who realizes sometimes art is in the eyes of the beholder in* The Road Virus Heads North.

stories, and then finding the best writers to adapt those short stories into material that actors and actresses want to do. That's really the key to it all."

In addition to Hurt, that strategy attracted actors like William H. Macy (*Fargo, Seabiscuit*), Tom Berenger (TV's *Into the West, Third Watch*), and Richard Thomas (TV's *Wonder Boys, The Waltons*). Even better, what's happening with this miniseries is a throwback to the golden era of television.

"It's not like a television series," Robe says about *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*, "because in a series you would normally have the same cast and the same sets—you don't have to reinvent the wheel for each episode. In this production, it's a different cast, wholly new locations, and new sets every two weeks of filming.

"In a way, we're the latest take on something that was once a staple on television: the anthology series. It was a wonderfully successful entertainment form in America at one time. It hasn't been done for a while, and we're resurrecting it in a whole new way. We're excited about that. We think it's time for anthology series again."

During the 1950s, popular TV series like *Playhouse 90* adapted stage plays to television. (The "90" referred to 90 minutes—the length of each episode.) Every week a different play aired. These series launched the careers of many actors, such as Paul Newman, as well as writers like Rod Serling. The playhouse series paved the way for a new breed of TV in the late 1950s and 1960s: Instead of a stage play, an original fantasy or horror story aired each week. *Alfred Hitchcock Presents, The Twilight Zone*, and *The Outer Limits* were successful anthology series, followed by Rod Serling's *Night Gallery* in the 1970s. Although they've been resurrected with varying degrees of success ever since, no new anthology series has been as successful as the classics. Steven Spielberg took a shot with an *Amazing Stories* TV anthology in the mid-1980s, but it was short-lived.

Which poses the question: Is it possible for a new anthology series to succeed where others have failed in the past 30 years?

"What you're really striving to do," Hayes says, "is get the audience interested in coming back every week to see something that is completely different each time."

"There's a nice cross-section of themes and styles and moods," Robe says. "Stephen King has never been just one thing. He is quite capable of writing everything from mainstream horror to something like *Shawshank Redemption*, which is very character driven and different from the kind of thrills and chills that a lot of people normally associate with Stephen King."

"He has a huge following that has evolved over many years," Hayes says about King. "He's been such a prolific writer. His novels and short stories spark people's imaginations, whether it's a horror story or *Twilight Zone*-type story or a reality shift or a quirky, everyday-life twist and turn. His stories always have extremely interesting characters at their core, and I think that's one of the main things that people enjoy. They get involved with the characters he writes."

Since Hayes signed on to produce *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*, he's been reading more of King's short work. "I like the fact that when I read his material I can get lost in it. In a lot of the short stories that I've now read, I don't get halfway through the short story and put it down and go do something else. I make sure that I don't have to go anywhere when I start one. I get very involved in it and don't want to stop until I'm forced to stop by the end of the story. I think that's the hallmark of a great storyteller."

Hayes and Robe agree that the greatest challenge in making *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* has been making a unique episode every two weeks and maintaining high quality. Filming in Melbourne, Australia, two teams were created to work in alternative shifts. In other words, whenever one team was completing the production of an episode, the other team was gearing up to shoot the next one.

"It may sound like we're doing a series," Robe says, "and we are in the sense that they're being shot back to back and it's being done in one time and place. But we don't look at them as a series, per se. We look at these as eight individual films. We have mostly different writers and different directors for all eight films, and it was important to us to allow the filmmakers to find their interpretation of these brilliant Stephen King stories, let them tell the story in their own way, and let the differences that spring from the nature of the material happen. We felt that no matter what, the link will always be that these stories are told through the prism of Stephen King."

Robe first joined *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* as the writer and director of one episode: "You Know They Got a Hell of a Band." Even though he wasn't given a choice of stories, Robe believes his episode is such a great fit that it's the one he would have chosen for himself. Once he started writing, he was invited to wear a producer's cap as well. After reading the seven other stories, he signed on as a producer for the entire miniseries.

"I thought 'Hell of a Band' was a really nice and different color to the Stephen King palette," Robe says about the episode he wrote and directed. "On the surface, it's a hugely entertaining story about a couple having marital difficulty who get lost in the backwoods of Oregon and discover an almost Shangri La-like village called Rock and Roll Heaven. And

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comes book two in the

Book one, *LARA*,

[illegible]

[illegible] given up his scheme to become emperor,

[illegible]

to once again heed the pull of her destiny.

it turns out the town fathers are actually warlords who are the dead icons of rock and roll: Elvis Presley is the mayor and Janis Joplin is a waitress in a diner."

While Robe finds the story fun and engaging, he stresses the theme of what happens to people who fail to change. "It's not only about the failure to adapt and grow, but I think it's also a little bit about the tyranny of pop culture. It becomes both of those things: people who hang onto one stage of their lives and one era can't adapt to change. And if one person changes in a relationship and the other one doesn't, that relationship is doomed to fail.

"It even touches on a lot of what Stephen King has written about and what most of his stories are about in some way. He writes about death a lot, and how we're able to deal with death. If there are ghosts, that's just death masked in a different way, to quote Stephen."

Describing himself as a product of the rock-and-roll generation, Robe faced two major challenges in filming this episode. First, he had to create the fictional and rural town of Rock and Roll Heaven, Oregon, in Melbourne, which required building a $250,000 set in a pine plantation. The goal was to make the town look almost too perfect to give it a *Twilight Zone* feel, because that's how one of the characters describes it in King's story.

The other challenge that Robe faced was to find actors who could successfully portray the icons of rock and roll.

"You can't just go out on the street and throw a stick and hit the right Elvis Presley or the right Ricky Nelson," Robe says. "These people are indelible in lots of minds across

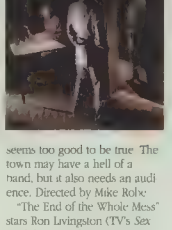
Continued on page 90

NIGHTMARES AND DREAMSCAPES: THE STORIES | BY RESA NELSON

Most of the stories in *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* come from the Stephen King collection by the same name. A few stories are from two other King collections: *Everything's Eventual* and *Night Shift*. In no particular order, here are the stories you can expect to see brought to life in this summer's TV anthology.

"Umney's Last Case" stars William H. Macy as Clyde Umney, a Depression-era private detective who would feel at ease in a Raymond Chandler novel. He's happily in the habit of buying his daily newspaper from the blind newsboy on the corner and shooting the breeze with the elevator man in his office building. One day everything goes out of kilter. First, the paper boy says his mother has won the lottery in Mexico, and they're using some of the money to cure his blindness. Then the elevator man not only says he's returning but insists that Umney has known about it for a month. Everything is changing and none of it makes sense until Umney comes face to face with the man who created him— and wants to literally live Umney's life. Directed by Rob Bowman (*Reign of Fire, Elektra*).

"You Know They Got a Hell of a Band" stars Steven Weber (TV's *Cursed, Wings*) and Kim Delaney (TV's *NYPD Blue, The OC*) as Mary and Clark Wittingham, a married couple who get lost in rural Oregon. When they come to a fork in the road, Mary advises him to turn back but Clark won't admit he's lost. They stumble onto a sign welcoming them to a town named Rock and Roll Heaven, which



seems too good to be true. The town may have a hell of a band, but it also needs an audience. Directed by Mike Robe.

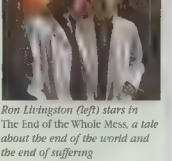
"The End of the Whole Mess" stars Ron Livingston (TV's *Sex and the City, The Practice*) as Howard Fornoy, a filmmaker who documents his final hour. Fornoy's goal is to tell the story of the end of war, the degeneration of humankind, and the death of the Messiah, who happens to be his brother Bobby (Henry Thomas of *Gangs of New York, ET*). As a young genius, Bobby wondered why people are so mean to each other and made it his life mission to do something about it. Once Bobby grows up and makes good on his promise, what no one anticipates is the ultimate effect of Bobby's dream to end world-wide pain. Directed by Mikael Salomon (TV's *Salem's Lot*).

"The Fifth Quarter" stars Jeremy Sisto (*Angel Eyes*, TV's *6 Feet Under*) as Jerry Tarkanian, a criminal who breaks into another man's house at night with revenge on his mind. When a friend is murdered, Jeremy learns about a map to a buried fortune. That map has been torn into four pieces and divided among the men who stole it. Jeremy is determined to avenge his friend's death and take the money for himself. But to do so, he must confront every man who still holds a quarter of the map. Directed by Rob Bowman.

"The Road Virus Heads North" stars Tom Berenger as Richard Kimmell, an author driving home from a conference. He stops at a yard sale and buys a painting of a young man driving a muscle car. The painting appeals to him because the man in it has fangs. When Richard makes another stop to visit his Aunt Trudy (Marsha Mason of *Bride and Prejudice, The Goodby Girl*), she's terrified of the painting and advises him to get rid of it, but he ignores her until he realizes that the painting is changing. The more the painting changes, the more Richard begins to believe that Aunt Trudy's instincts are right and he has to figure out how to get rid of the painting. Directed by Sergio Mimica-Gezzan (TV's *Taken, Invasion*).

"Battleground" stars William Hurt as John Renshaw, a hired assassin described as a human hawk who can do two things superbly: kill and survive. John returns home after a business trip to Miami, where he killed the owner of a toy company. There's a package waiting for him and it's been mailed from Miami. After determining it's not a bomb, John opens the package, and toy soldiers emerge and open fire. John is in for the battle of his life as a toy army uses his apartment as their battleground. Directed by Brian Henson (TV's *Farscape*).

"Crouch End" stars Eion Bailey (TV's *ER, Band of Brothers*) and Claire Forlani (*Meet Joe Black, Mystery Men*) as an American couple vacationing in London. When they take a cab to London's Crouch End to visit a business associate, they notice something's odd, such as an ominous sign announcing "Sixty Lost in Underground Horror." They soon find themselves lost in a very mysterious and pecu



Ron Livingston (left) stars in The End of the Whole Mess, *a tale about the end of the world and the end of suffering*

liar part of London. The short story was first published in *New Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos* and taps into the world created by H.P. Lovecraft.

"Autopsy Room Four" stars Richard Thomas as Howard Cottrell, a stockbroker who wakes up in a hospital. The last thing he can remember is playing golf and searching for a lost ball in the rough. Now he's in the dark but soon realizes he's in a body bag. Unable to speak or move, Howard ends up on an autopsy table as an inexperienced doctor gets ready to practice his dissection skills. Directed by Mikael Salomon.

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By Kit Whitfield

The literary werewolf is something of an orphan.

Unlike the other great monsters of the Western traditions, there is no seminal work to cast its grand shadow over the form: no *Dracula*, no *Frankenstein*, no book that started it all. Books have been written, some of them very good, but none has acquired the stature in the public imagination that the werewolf's supernatural cousins enjoy. While having no towering parent to measure up to can be freeing for a writer, it has its down sides too.

Compare the werewolf's lost condition, for example, with the aristocracy that the vampire enjoys. In the 19th century, folk tales and less successful works such as *Varney the Vampyre* and John Polidori's *The Vampyre* gave the vampire some currency in the collective unconscious—not unlike the position of the werewolf today, kept alive by a scattering of different stones with no leader of the pack to keep them in line. With the birth of Dracula, though, we were given a patriarch who set the pattern for every vampire thereafter. This may sound oppressive, condemning his descendants to mere imitation, but in fact the genre has flourished on its heritage. The elements of a vampire can be varied, but there are enough props—garlic, daylight, stakes, mirrors, crosses, mists, animals, coffins, slaves, mesmerism, the list goes on—that any one handling the genre has plenty to [illegible] get her teeth into. As a result, the vampire stories of today are rich, diverse, and most importantly, they couldn't be about anything but vampires. Take any good vampire tale and imagine how it would read if you substituted the vampire for, say, Frankenstein's monster or an ancient mummy. It just wouldn't work. The popular panoply of vampiric attributes is absolutely essential, and writers always weave them thoroughly into the fabric of the story.

The Howling (1981) was a tongue-in-cheek horror flick that ushered in the werewolf craze of the 80s.

The werewolf is a more loose-woven entity and, as a result, may come unraveled. I've sat through werewolf movies that would work just as well if the monster was an alien, a super-robot, a loose spirit, or any other scary beast with the power of disguise. Written stories, lacking the benefits and demands of a special-effects department, don't degenerate into your straight-up action story quite so often, but they have another difficulty. The obvious parallel to use when telling the tale is the inner beast, and that's what a lot of writers decide to dwell on. The inner beast by itself, though, is a limited subject. Either we embrace our dark side and learn to live with it, or we don't and [illegible] those who would engage their without other strands in the plot, there's not [illegible] to say. Just [illegible]. The other elements of the werewolf are often vague; sometimes we have pentagrams and wolfsbane, but they don't loom large in our psyches. The definite ones are silver bullets and full moon—and that's it. Not enough by themselves to build a tradition.

The best werewolf tale is probably Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Hyde doesn't grow fangs or howl at the moon, but as an animalistic alter ego who possesses his subject and controls his actions, he has everything but the fur. Now there's a story that has a panoply

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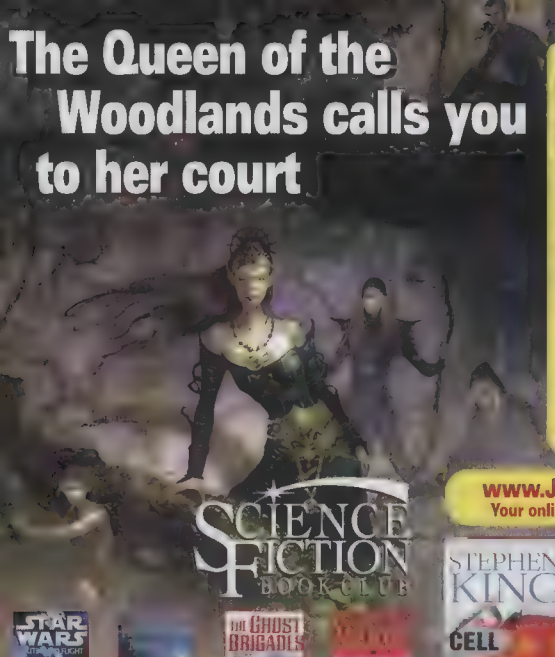

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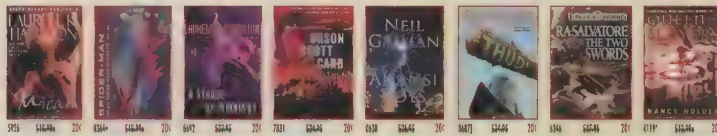

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A 16th century German illustration depicting lycanthropic madness

like the vampire — science, trespass on God's domain, irreversible decisions, selfhood, addiction, social constraints—and, as a result, we're still playing with the idea. Alas for the werewolf, though, because Mr Hyde has picked up his cane and marched firmly out of lycanthropic territory into his own separate domain, leaving our poor beast once again masterless.

In citing Stevenson's novella as the best werewolf story, I'm slighting various authors, Angela Carter and Saki (H H Munro) in particular, but there's a reason why Angela Carter's magnificent fairy tales (filmed by Neil Jordan as *The Company of Wolves*, which I'd recommend to anyone interested in the genre) are a bewitching study of the psycho-sexual implications of the myth. There is also Saki, brilliant, urbane, disturbing, whose satires—most notably his short story "Gabriel-Ernest"—return several times to the theme of wolves or werewolves as the perfect image for the vicious, primeval rapacity that underlies the brittle surface of his world. The reason I don't propose them as leaders in the field of werewolf stories is that their works don't hold quite the same position that Mary Shelley's or Bram Stoker's offspring do. For one thing, it's generally imperfect books that start a trend, other writers and filmmakers get inspired with thoughts of what they could do to improve on the original. Saki and Carter are too good to fiddle around with—they stand alone, and elaborating on them seems rather pointless. In addition, they have both managed the trick we sometimes witness in non-mainstream writing: an author writes a story in a certain genre and produces something so well crafted and intelligent that people end up not thinking of it as a member of that genre at all, but rather as a *literary* work that happens to include elements of a particular genre but, as it were, rises above them. Write a good enough genre story, and it is not considered genre. It's a self-perpetuating trend, because if all the best works get officially sublimated out of, say, the horror category, then what's left are the less advanced works, and any author who writes another good horror story will be likewise sublimated out of a kind of critical courtesy, so as not to confound him or her with the works that have officially failed to transcend their genre and remain just plain horror, romance, or whatever. With all the best examples labeled as something else, a genre's reputation sinks, ambitious and innovative writers start to avoid it, and it remains publicly perceived as trashy, even when there's no artistic reason why it should be.

More recently, fantasy authors have tried to tackle the myth, but it's not as easy as it seems. All genres have their pitfalls, and one of fantasy's pitfalls is the Mary Sue character: the wish-fulfilment girl who is impossibly special and uniquely talented (and about whom there is much entertaining material to be found on the Internet, for those who are interested). This doubtful girl can easily rear her pretty head with the werewolf tale if the writer isn't careful. Naming no names, the werewolf dream girl, let's call her Furry Sue, is usually wild in the glamorous sense, meaning bold, strong, and direct, but the less appealing aspects of wildness don't always get a look-in. She may have a "wolf-like" understanding of dominance, but she never savages someone weaker than herself just to make their relative status clear. She may be feral, a foundling, but she never masturbates publicly or shows a self-enclosed lack of awareness of others' existence. Like Tarzan she is one of nature's winners, and her sojourn in the forest functions more as an internship than a walk on the wild side. As such, she's a generalized empowerment fantasy in wolf's clothing rather than a sign of serious thought about the myth, more a hyena feeding off the kill than a leader who can take the pack in a different direction. She can have her moments of fun, but she's not what the genre needs.

Some recent novels have avoided this trap with involving and thoughtful results. Alice Hoffman's *Second Nature* renders a wild man in her beautiful, lyrical prose. He is, indeed, a creature of nature—but nature being what it is, this includes being fearful, starving, isolated; his experiences in the frozen outdoors are real, graphic, and have a permanent bearing on his life that go beyond simply being a glamorous beginning. The consistently intelligent Gillian Bradshaw's *The Wolf Hunt*, a retelling of Marie de France's medieval lay *Bisclavret*, has a protagonist whose lycanthropy is, interestingly, less a representation of his wild side than an extension of his introversion, part of a closely guarded inner life rather than a sign of his darkness or specialness. Both are admirable works that show impressive integrity of thought and feeling, as well as being most enjoyable. However, students of lycanthropy do not seem to be aware of them, and it's primarily because of my own research that I'm able to cite them, though I'd certainly recommend them to anyone interested in good fiction with a lycanthropic flavor.

So, Carter and Saki stand as literary works rather than werewolf yarns and have not spawned imitators; the more contemporary Hoffman and Bradshaw have loyal readers but, again, are not much copied as mythologists. Furry Sue nibbles at the edges but has as little impact here as she has elsewhere. It's impossible to say for sure why some books take on their own momentum and others don't, but for whatever reason, these don't form part of the collective unconscious, and no one is tinkering with them very much.

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There are other classic werewolf stories, such as Guy Endore's *The Werewolf of Paris*, that just aren't widely known. This leaves Stevenson, whose two-footed werewolf is now dancing to his own tune, and that's about it. No big unread monster in the werewolf canon.

I think there are two main reasons for this literary vacuum. One of them is that the werewolf, almost uniquely, came into contemporary nightmares not via a novel but via a movie. George Waggner's *The Wolf Man*, a great film, established just about everything we understand the werewolf to be. It created its own traditions, some of which (such as the pentangle in the victim's hand) we simply forgot about, others of which we have enshrined. Werewolfism being transferred by a bite, for example, is not something we find in the medieval folk tales, but everyone believes it now. So why should Waggner's descendants not be flourishing like Stoker's?

Films tend to found less complex mythic traditions than books, not because they're a lesser art form, but mostly because they're shorter: there simply isn't space to put in the complications and details that adaptations thrive on. Films that succeed in creating their own followings, such as *The Wicker Man* (no monsters there, but an array of beliefs and details), often work by implying a great deal of culture or history happening off screen. They have to circumvent the time limits and I can't think of a werewolf movie that's managed this difficult trick. It's also possible that the visual strengths make it harder to diverge from what you've seen. If you have to imagine what everything looks like, you're more likely to end up in a different place than the original creator intended than if it's there on the screen in front of you.

The biggest hindrance of the genre, though, is already present in *The Wolf Man* and continues today. Leaving aside the lesser action-movie beasties, what do the greatest movie werewolves of our era have in common? They all, ultimately, belong to a different category than the one to which they owe their birth. Larry Talbot (*The Wolf Man*), Leon (*Curse of the Werewolf*), David Kessler (*An American Werewolf in London*), Ginger Fitzgerald (*Ginger Snaps*) are all interesting protagonists who labor under a fatal flaw that ultimately brings their downfall. In other words, tragic heroes. The werewolf has had to take refuge as a subsection of a mightier genre in order to get his story told. While all these stories are fine works in themselves, they bind the werewolf to one inescapable narrative: somehow or other, he has to fall. It leaves the plot limited space for maneuver. There are a few decent werewolves who do lead a more varied life, but they tend to be exceptions that prove the rule. I'll always put in a word for *Howling VI: The Freaks*, as neat and atmospheric a B-movie as you'll find, for example, whose hero manages not to end up gunned down by his father figure. Instead, he walks off into a rather melancholic sunrise having defeated his enemy, saved his friend, and renounced the girl. However, it's obscure, plus it's the fifth sequel to a movie where the werewolf *does* get shot—and the first *Howling* film is considered a major contribution to the genre. It would seem that if you're a movie werewolf and want to be taken seriously, then there's no way out: it's the silver bullet for you, fuzzy.

A clip from a 13th century rubbing describing a folktale, featuring the werewolves as ex-communicates.

We can't blame the movies, though. There have been some excellent films made, and if they follow a similar plot pattern, well, there are only three/six/eight plots in the world, depending on who you talk to. The real reason why the werewolf is such a stray has to do with history.

Frankenstein came to light in the late 18th century, Dracula in the 19th. While culture has changed since then, they're only a handful of generations back. The stories were written about a world we can visualize easily enough, if not exactly recognize; they were written as novels, a form we all know and love; the idea of a literary tradition was established well enough that plenty of information has been preserved about their authors. Most importantly, perhaps, they were written in modern English, and as fiction. In other words, they're accessible. We only have to reach back a dozen decades or so, and there the stones lie, within our grasp.

The werewolf is *old*. Animal cults stretch back into pre-history, tens of millennia ago: the earliest evidence comes from bear cult altars estimated to have been built in about 75,000 BC. Cave paintings of leopard men have been dated as early as 6000 BC. The first written tale involving an animal-man character is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, with its feral Enkidu,

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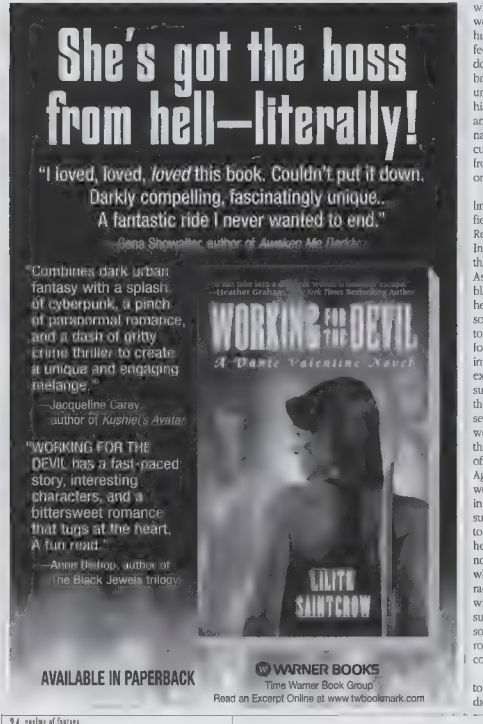
which dates back to 2000 BC That's four thousand years, forty times the distance between us and the seminal vampire. The imagination simply can't keep hold on such vast, unimaginable differences

The idea of a man being able to work magic and transform himself into a beast is common to just about every culture Were-crocodile and were-leopard beliefs exist in Africa, for instance, we have werewolves because wolves were the dominant predator in Europe There's a difference, though, between these pre-Christian hunters and what has become our monster Enkidu first called on to hunder and later to help the hero Gilgamesh *berserker* (bear-shirt) soldiers wearing the skins of wolves to give themselves wolvish ferocity; the hero of the 13th century *Völsungsaga* becoming a werewolf as part of his warrior training. Native American trackers appealing to wolf-spirits for their skills in following a trail; all of these werewolves are unlike our stalking demons. What they are is soldiers and humsmen, members of a community temporarily withdrawing from it and making an effort to take on some of the qualities of the wolf to serve a socially useful purpose Responsible, public-spirited werewolves, in fact

We still have that concept in a specific subset of our popular culture—Batman, anyone? Or Spiderman? Comics are keeping the hero-lycanthrope alive They occupy a very different place in our heads, though—and a man who turned himself into a wolf for the benefit of society would very likely come across as a superhero type rather than trigger the word "werewolf" in our memories. Wolverine the X-man doesn't have much in common with Larry Talbot The most lycanthropic comic book hero I can think of is the Incredible Hulk—uncontrollable rages leading to a more animal state—but he's still a virtuous protagonist, which means people don't generally associate him with the werewolf tradition (unless, like me, they've spent too long in the library) There are, I've discovered, various other, less well known werewolf-superhero comic characters but, as with Spiderman and Batman, they belong to the ancient model their powers make them better able to achieve their generally legitimate goals Thus is not what most people think of when they think of werewolves the werewolf as we understand him cannot have a social conscience, beyond feeling guilty for the things his animal side does. The mainstream image is of a great hairy brute that leaps out and eats you up. He's an unqualified threat to order and safety, both his own and others' He's also suffering from an affliction that is, of itself, *demonic* not a natural condition, nor a learned skill, but a curse, something that can only have come from an evil source These ideas are medieval ones, and they stem from the witch trials

The witch trials—which were not, in fact, limited to the Middle Ages, but burned just as fiercely through the supposedly enlightened Renaissance—were the children of the first Inquisition, intended to root out heresies that threatened the security of the Catholic church. As understood then, the witch wasn't the black-hatted spell-caster that we understand her to be- a better word would be "Satanist"—someone who had given their entire self over to the Devil (either voluntarily or because he forced them) and who gained the ability to invoke him and do his destructive works in exchange. Werewolf trials are a more obscure subject, and there were fewer "werewolves" than "witches" condemned But, bizarre as it seems now, people did go to the stake and worse because a court found them guilty of this crime It was uncommon at the beginning of the witch trials—in fact, in the early Middle Ages it was considered heretical to believe in werewolves at all—but the accusations gained in frequency as they carried on. This is presumably in part due to the fact that interrogators knew in advance what they expected to hear and tended to ask their suspects yes-or-no questions—an eminently practical system when we consider how capable of speech a racked victim was likely to be. Each new case will have added to the edifice of belief—not superstition, but theological belief, held by some of the finest minds of the day –that surrounded witches and werewolves. each new confession will have bolstered it

The reality behind such cases is by now lost to us Werewolves who confessed generally did so under torture; what they would have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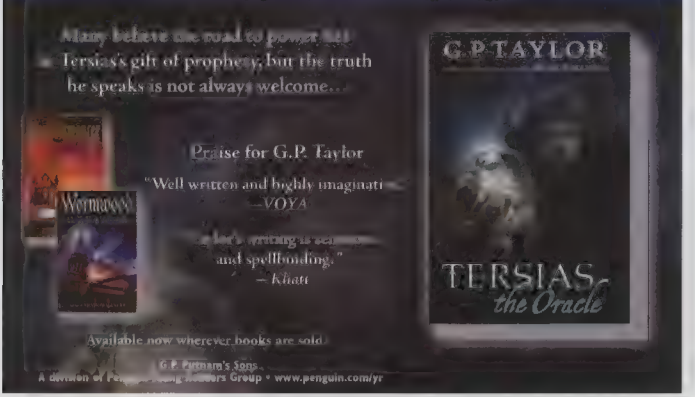
said if they hadn't been tormented can only be guessed at. The 1589 trial record of Peter Stubbe, who conjured the Devil who granted him the power to disguise himself as a wolf leaving him free to rape and murder without fear of detection, for instance, declares quite straight-faced that "being apprehended, he was shortly after put to the rack in the town of Bedbur, but fearing the torture, he voluntarily confessed his whole life." Some of the evidence of werewolfery is, by contemporary standards, ridiculous—one source (Henri Boguet's *Discours de Sorciers*, written from 1590-1611, tells of "three wolves that were seen on the 18th of July, 1603, in the district of Douvres and Jeurre about half an hour after a hailstorm had very strangely ruined all the fruit of that country. These wolves had no tails, and, moreover, as they ran through herds of cows and goats they touched none of them except one little kid, which one of them carried a little distance away without doing it any harm at all. It is apparent from this that these were not natural wolves, but were rather witches who had helped to cause the hailstorm, and had come to witness the damage which they had caused."

It sounds like tenuous logic to modern ears we, after all, no longer believe the Devil walks among us, and are more inclined to blame God if our livelihood gets destroyed. This, though, was a scholarly discussion, written by a prominent judge who passed sentence on accused werewolves in his court as reputable an authority as could be found. It's hard to be entirely critical of the locals who reported this news, too; any community that's just lost its entire crop may well be excused for being desperate to find reasons for such a disaster.

There are other explanations for the belief that our scientific age finds more credible. Pursuers who lost sight of the wolf they were chasing and happened upon a man may have seized this entirely innocent bystander under the impression that he had transformed; a man with a wounded leg happened upon by hunters who had just shot a wolf in the same place may have met the same fate. It should be remembered, though, that the most famous of the supposed werewolves who were convicted—Stubbe in 1589, the Gandillon family of the same year, who were convicted en masse after one of them, Pernette, attacked two little girls; Jacques Roulet of Angers in northern France, who was caught one morning in 1598 still eating the body of a fifteen-year old boy (and was imprisoned in an asylum, fortunately for him); Gilles Garnier, who preyed upon children and was convicted in 1573—were, at least according to the available evidence, murderers. We would call them serial killers: predatory and sometimes sexual sadism were an essential part of their professed wolfishness. Food was scarce, poverty rife, and with cannibalism an ever-present fear, it is easy to see why werewolf paranoia came into being, especially in areas where real wolves preyed upon the harried villagers' stock. There are cases too—such as that of Jean Grenier, a boy discovered wandering in France who made a nuisance of himself by threatening and importuning local girls and talking about turning into a wolf—in which the accused genuinely did believe that he was a werewolf and declared himself as such. They were not quite the romanticized victims of 20th-century folklore: their deeds, and their fates, were harsher.

Oddly enough, witch burners did not, for the most part, believe that people could turn into wolves. That would imply the Devil had the power to work miracles. Theologically, it wasn't an allowable belief, it went against the notion that the Devil was weaker than God. Most theoreticians believed that werewolfism was a diabolical glamour, that Satan induced in both lycanthrope and victims the illusion that a transformation had taken place. (This was not considered to be any excuse. Boguet expresses the prevailing view when he remarks, "Even if they were guilty in nothing but their damnable intention, they should still be thought worthy of death... such people never have this intention, except those who have first renounced God and Heaven.") Nowadays we talk of delusion, egotism, temporal lobe seizures, rabies, porphyria, and a wide variety of scientific explanations has been proffered, trying to find a rational expla-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"The Wolfman" 1941, starred Lon Chaney Jr as a tortured monster with a soul

nation for this wildest of beasts. There is also the phenomenon of lycanthropy proper, the mental illness that causes the sufferer to experience transformations and believe himself to be a werewolf, werecat, or whatever animal has taken possession of his psyche. This, interestingly, was recognized as a mental illness before the Inquisition took off, and was considered a form of melancholia, to be treated medically rather than taken seriously. We seem to have come full circle on that belief. True crime writers with an interest in the occult sometimes lump all sexual sadists or cannibals under the werewolf label—a broad-brush approach that clouds the issue more than it illuminates it when carelessly applied. Even today, a little digging on the Internet turns up discussion boards for modern citizens who style themselves as "were wolves." Some seem to be using the werewolf as a metaphor, in line with New Age spirituality, some describe violent rages or attention deficit disorder and consider that these are mundane, incorrect interpretations of their natures, that the true reason for these furies or difficulties is their "were" side, some talk about "humans" as if the category excluded them. I feel entirely unqualified to proffer explanations, all I can say is that their position is an altogether safer one than it would have been four centuries ago.

Whether or not Inquisitors believed that men could become wolves, people suffered for it. Communities that saw their children disappear must have undergone agonies at the thought that a werewolf might be preying upon them, and the arrests, torture, and burning alive of the convicted werewolves add their own details to the wider picture of one of the most horrible true stories in our collective history. If you look at the medieval folk tales, they seem to have a preferred traditional ending, just as fairy stories do. In place of "and they lived happily ever after," we find, recurring over and over, "he was reported to the judge and subsequently burned."

In any case, this is the answer, the true parents of our foundling werewolf. He was conjured up by starved and plague stricken citizens and racked out of vagabonds and outcasts by the Inquisition. It's a darker and bloodier birth than any other creature in our history experienced. Compare the werewolf's terrible inception to Bram Stoker's private nightmare of the three succubi (for which incidentally, the Inquisition might well have laid its claws upon him if he'd been unfortunate enough to live under its shadow), or Mary Shelley's triumphant production of the best fireside spook-story for her party of friends, and we begin to see why the tradition remains a bare bones one. If you invent at leisure for your own interest and enjoyment you can create a detailed legend. If the question asked of you is a yes-or-no one posed by a hooded man with his hand on the lever, the urge to embroider is removed.

We reinvented the werewolf in the 20th century. The germ of the idea was too far away and stank too strongly of the pyre to be taken into our popular culture. As a result, the traditional accouterments of the werewolf, which might have spawned a tradition to rival Dracula's, are largely forgotten. The wolf belt

Continued on page 90

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By Gahan Wilson

Philip Roth pens the ultimate tale of alternative history.

I confess I didn't buy **The Plot Against America** by Philip Roth (Vintage Books, NY, 391 pp., trade paperback, $14.95) when it came out in its original hardcover edition, but the moment I spotted it recently displayed prominently in paperback form on a primo table in one of the larger chain bookstores it was an almost automatic act to pluck it from its stack, admire its clever cover featuring a United States penny postage stamp bearing a scenic view of Yosemite Park brutally endorsed with the pitch black imprint of a Nazi swastika, and take it home to read.

Mainstream authors very seldom wander off into fantasy genre themes and fantasy genre authors even more seldomly wander off into writing mainstream novels. I have always felt this was a great pity and *The Plot Against America* vindicates this notion forcefully.

Naomi Novik blends fantasy with the Napoleonic Wars in her novel Her Majesty's Dragon.

The "World of If" challenge is one of the best fundamental fantasy genres around since it allows us not only to fly off into a past or present or future interestingly different from our own, but shows us a vast multitude of new ways to explore and understand our past and present in all sorts of clever and revealing ways, and to examine—and perhaps even alter for the better the future to which we appear to be heading. It is altogether not unlike the odd educational process induced by travel to other lands and societies that in the end often reveals to the traveler much about his own native land and home-grown ways than he may ever have observed before.

The Plot Against America takes place in an imagined America from 1940 to 1942 and the single overarching "World of If" element introduced by Roth that sets it apart from the real America of that period (which you and I have sprung from) is that Franklin Delano Roosevelt looses the presidency of the United States to the dashing pilot Charles H. Lindbergh, whose heroic solo flight across the Atlantic from our shores to Paris earned him the nickname of "Lucky Lindy" and a great burst of unquestioning admiration from the voting public who fail to see anything really seriously wrong with Lindy's open and enthusiastic admiration for the spectacular air force Adolf Hitler has created, nor do they find the young hero's somewhat softer spoken approval of that same dictator's viciously effective official enforcement of rabid anti-semitism to be particularly offensive.

The point of view character in *The Plot Against America*, however, happens to be the seven-year-old offspring of a Jewish family living in a modest, middle-class apartment in Newark, New Jersey, so the fulminations of his father, the worried fretting of his mother, and the general concern among his Jewish neighbors make him very much aware, from the earliest stages of the campaign between between FDR and Lindy, that the outcome of their contest is likely to have a very personal bearing on both his

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future and those of his dearest beloved.

I think the most remarkable thing about this book is that though Roth's rendering of the grimness and horror of this growing menace is always merciless in its steadily growing awfulness and its deep, dank creepiness, there is always a marvelous, unfailing undercurrent of humor and compassion in his telling of it, which I confess has profoundly increased my personal understanding of the vileness of bigotry.

On a more superficial, technical level, I noticed many interesting differences between this mainstream novel and the ones I have read within the genre. The action in the genre "World of If" books tends to be rather scheduled, each event treading on the heels of the one before it with as little lagging in the action as possible. In this book, Roth has no problem letting the action slow or even stop altogether if he feels some character's motivation should be explored or the implications of some event call for further elaboration. Also, in an even more radical departure from usual genre procedures, he will abruptly reveal a whole sweep of action digested into a space as small as a paragraph instead of hoarding revelations as a genre writer often tends to do, and then go back and spend pages developing and expanding upon the early stages of the episode whose climax he's already divulged. Very ungenre.

One aspect of *The Plot Against America* that particularly goes against genre "rules," but which I very much liked and would not mind seeing pop up in genre books, was the addition at the end of short bios of the main historical characters that figured in the books, giving bits of their history and characters that add to the reader's understanding of how and why they acted as they did in the course of the story just read. I suppose, though you could construe it as being a tad cynical, a genre author would be likely to avoid that practice because it might give away a little too much material were he to decide to write a sequel, but I still think, in most cases, it would enrich a "World of If" book considerably.

In any case, all that aside, I can't recommend this book too highly. And I don't think for a moment that Roth's timing of its writing was accidental.

In his witty and highly instructive (to those who would be authors) introduction William Browning Spencer is happy to report that ***The Ocean and All Its Devices*** (Subterranean Press, Burton, MI, 197 pp., trade paperback, $40.00), his second collection of short stories, is entirely composed of tales that have previously been purchased and printed, whereas every tale in his first collection of short stories had, every single one, never found a prior home.

Spencer views that as an encouraging sign and I sincerely applaud his optimism, particularly since it comes from one who clearly tends to view the world about him from a

darkish point of view, and I very much hope it buoys him enough to persist in writing more short stories (and selling them and seeing them published) as I'd very much like to be able to read another of his collections since this one struck me a being singularly enjoyable.

The tone of the book is well and deeply sounded by its title story, "The Ocean and All Its Devices." It takes place in a very cozy-seeming scene, a highly pleasant little seaside hotel in North Carolina well run by a likable couple that has, in some way not quite clear to the owners, attracted regular very late season annual visits from the Franklin family, a middle aged husband, his much younger wife, and their frail, pale young daughter. Their last visit is so late into the fall that the owners are forced to extend the hotel's usual closing time for these regular clients, but they come to regret their courtesy as darkly mysterious events accumulate and the story turns darkly Lovecraftian but in a way and with a style and skill I have very seldom encountered. And it is genuinely scary.

Many of the other stories are Lovecraftian, but Lovecraft filtered though an author who takes the tradition in all sorts of interestingly different and startling directions. Spencer very clearly understands that the monsters aren't what's at the heart of HPL's vision. It's the hopelessness, stupid. It's the truly pathetic inability of the characters to alter their situation for the better that fascinates, that and the total indifference of the appalling forces their blunders have activated.

One aspect I found particularly impressive in these stories is that even when the ghastly menaces come into full view the thing is so strange that the characters—and also the reader—can never quite grasp exactly what the damn thing looks like, or what it is really up to

There is an element of mockery in many of the tales, almost a sort of teasing amusement at the characters' deep confusion, their total inability to figure out what the hell is going on all around them Maybe the most overt of these is the final story, "The Essavist in the Wilderness," which makes very funny fun of a poor smp who decides he will write deep essays on nature and is generously accommodated by Nature, which reveals itself and its workings to him with a vengeance

Other themes are also wittily and very spookily looked over The forces of chance are examined with a very cold eye in "The Oddskeeper's Daughter", some hints of the tricksiness of Magic are revealed in "The Lights of Armageddon", and the cruel misuse of power is clinically demonstrated to be a highly dangerous activity in ""The Death of the Novel

Really interesting and certainly highly entertaining stuff, and I do hope *The Ocean and All Its Desires* will be but an early step in what turns out to be an extremely successful career

The redoubtable Stephen Jones, bless his heart, having spread considerable joy among devotes of things Innsmouthian with his highly successful *Shadows Over Innsmouth* has kindly decided to bring out a new book containing a multitude of excellently crafted short stories on Lovecraft's dangerous and creepy coastal village called ***Weird Shadows Over Innsmouth***, (Fedogan & Bremer, Minneapolis, MN, 297 pp , trade hardcover, $35 00) the Weird being carefully designed so as to call to mind the "Weird" in *Weird Tales*.

Some of the authors here are veterans from the original book, but there are new kids on the mist-shrouded block and they do fine, too The anthology kicks off with an interesting first draft rejected by Lovecraft and preserved for posterity and this volume only because HPL, always working on the slimmest of financial margins, reused the backs of the rejected manuscript to write the final unrejected story.

If you are an Innsmouth addict, as I most certainly am, you'll find all kinds of delights ranging from "The Quest for Y'ha-Nthlei" by John Glasby, which is a rousingly detailed official report (we finally have the truth!) about the legendary government raid on both Innsmouth and its underwater environs to a nice bit of scholarly input, "From Cabinet 34, Drawer 6" by Caitlin R Kiernan, which nicely fills in a few gaps, an excellent and amusing little bit of drollery called "Fair Exchange" by Michael Marshall Smith and good old Brian Lumley comes through with a nicely compassionate piece called "The Taint." There are highly enjoyable illustrations by Randy Broecker, Les Edwards, Bob Eggleton, and Allan Servoss, who has a nice personal feel for Innsmouthian creepiness

All in all a very satisfying visit to the old place which I enjoyed very much

Lovingly reprinted from the French (it was originally two volumes,) the luxuriously illustrated ***Complete Encyclopedia of Elves, Goblins and Other Little Creatures*** (by Pierre Dubois, illustrated by Claudine and Roland Sabatier, Abbeville Press, NY, 375 pp., trade hardcover, $39 95) is a delight I love the thoughtful and now and then outright ironic tone of the author and am delighted with the scrumptious drawings that adorn every page in the book This a lovely companion to have around when you get a little cranky and it contains all sorts of very useful advice for mortals concerning fairies and their varied kin and how to get along with them peaceably

I really think it is a magical book, but

"A startlingly original take on magic and its price—fast, entertaining, and full of new twists."
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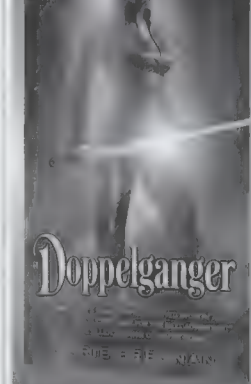

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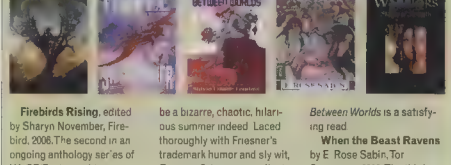

Firebirds Rising, edited by Sharyn November, Firebird, 2006.The second in an ongoing anthology series of YA SF/Fantasy edited by *Firebird* editor Sharyn November, this collection features 16 of the very best authors working in the field today. Francesca Lia Block, Emma Bull, Charles de Lint, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Kara Dalkey, Alan Dean Foster, Tanith Lee, Tamora Pierce, Ellen Klages, Diana Wynne Jones, and others make this a truly irresistible book, with highly memorable stories (and at least a few future award-winners, I'd bet). Space forbids me from going into detail, but Klage's story "In the House of the Seven Librarians" made me smile, while Bull's story "What Used To Be Good Still Is" captures the poignancy of lost love and missed chances in a small mining town. Jones's story "I'll Give You My Word" is a literary feast for the word-lover, and Hoffman's "Unwrapping" is short, but beautiful. This is an excellent book not just for YA fans, but for short fiction fans in general.

Temping Fate, by Esther Friesner. Dutton, 2006. When Iana Newhouse gets a temp job for the summer, little does she realize at first that she'll be filling in for the Greek Fates, who turn out to be alive and well (like the rest of the pantheon) and desperately in need of some time off. But there's more to the job than she realizes, especially when mythological characters such as Arachne and the Furies show up. And then there's her sister's upcoming wedding, which has turned the bride-to-be into Bridezilla. It's going to be a bizarre, chaotic, hilarious summer indeed. Laced thoroughly with Friesner's trademark humor and sly wit, *Temping Fate* is an excellent, highly humorous story that just begs for a sequel or three.

Skybreaker, by Kenneth Oppel, Eos, 2006. This sequel to *Airborn* finds our hero, Matt Cruse, teaming up with an arrogant airship captain, an intriguing gypsy girl, and an scholarly heiress as they search for the legendary lost *Hyperion*, a ghost ship rumored to contain great treasures and lost artifacts. Hot on their heels, though, is a rival ship crewed by ruthless pirates and evil entrepreneurs. It'll be a toss-up between the extremely high altitudes, the weather, the bizarre creatures living at 20,000 feet, and the bad guys to see which threatens Matt and his friends the most. Once again, Oppel gives us an exciting tale set in an alternate world where dirigibles rule, mad science lives on, and adventure can be found at every turn.

Journey Between Worlds, by Sylvia Louise Engdahl, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2006. In this reprint of a book originally published in 1970, a teenage girl is forced to leave behind everything she knows when her father takes her to Mars for an extended vacation that later turns into an indefinite stay. As she struggles with the many differences between Earth and Mars and works through her feelings for an alien world, she also comes to terms with her feelings for a local boy. Both a pleasant (if slightly dated) romance and a thoughtful look at what the future might bring, *Journey Between Worlds* is a satisfying read.

When the Beast Ravens by E Rose Sabin, Tor Starscape, 2006.The third book in the series begun with *A School for Sorcery*, this volume picks up on threads left unfinished, most specifically the tale of Gray Becq, whose misguided actions in the first book got him in so much trouble. Now, as he tries to readjust to school life, and to atone for his part in past offenses, his world is thrown into chaos as a demon stalks his friends and schoolmates. Ultimately, he'll have to understand his true role in the events at hand, and the true depths of his own powers. This is a nice continuation to the story, and a worthy resolution to the plotlines at hand.

Young Warriors, edited by Tamora Pierce and Josepha Sherman, Random House, 2005. In this collection, the unifying theme is that of warriors; in these stories, the protagonists are strong, willing to fight for what they believe in (even if they don't know it at first). A strong selection of authors, including Hol y Black, Esther Friesner, Mike Resnick, Laura Anne Gilman, Margaret Mahy, and Tamora Pierce, offer up 15 original stories that range across the spectrum of tone, setting, and genre. Just a few: Pierce's "Student of Ostriches" returns to her popular Tortall setting to flesh out a previously-unseen episode, while Friesner's "Thunderbolt" looks at the tale of Theseus and Helen in a whole new light.The multicultural nature of the stories is definitely a strength in this worthwhile anthology. ❧

don't trust me because I confess:
I have been charmed by it

Gahan Wilson

The Thousandfold Thought, The Prince of Nothing, Book Three, R. Scott Bakker, Overlook Press, New York, hardcover, 544 pp $26.95, ISBN 1-58567-705-1

Bakker's acclaimed Prince of Nothing trilogy, which began in *The Darkness That Comes Before* and continued in *The Warrior-Prophet*, reaches its advertised end with this volume. But in fact the series is far from over. There are at least four more books in the works, and *The Thousandfold Thought* is less a resolution of anything than it is a preparation for the darkness (or light) that comes after. Upon finishing this compulsively readable if at times maddeningly frustrating novel, I realized that the trilogy it completes is but a preface for the vast saga that Bakker means to write.

The Thousandfold Thought is a big book, but the events it covers take only a few weeks in real time, picking up from where *The Warrior-Prophet* left off, with Mandate wizard Drusas Achamian recovering from his ordeal of imprisonment and torture at the hands of rival sorcerers and from the discovery that, in his absence, his lover, the former prostitute Esmenet, betrayed him with his friend and student Anasûrimbor Kellhus and is now carrying his child. Kellhus, the Dûnyain who is the Prince of Nothing and the Warrior-Prophet and perhaps the embodiment of the world's destruction, has taken personal command of the Holy War, gathering the power he knows he will need when he confronts his father, Moëngus, waiting in the holy city of Shimeh, final stronghold of the Fanim of Kian and their blind wizards, the Cishaurim. Now Bakker shifts into high gear, detailing the march on Shimeh, the climactic battle with the Fanim, and the long-awaited confrontation between the two Dûnyain, father and son, masters of an almost supernaturally effective system of mental and physical discipline rooted in a bleakly mechanistic philosophy.

In previous books, Bakker has established that Achamian and his fellow Mandate wizards relive in nightly dreams events that took place two thousand years earlier, when the Consult first summoned the No-God, a mysterious extra-dimensional entity whose presence is utterly inimical to life. That apocalypse was barely averted; now its time has come round again, with Kellhus fated to play an integral part. For the first time, Bakker delves deeply into these dreams, so that they come to constitute a parallel narrative, in the process revealing a lot of back story, some of which is surprising, compelling a reevaluation of events and characters, and some of which is merely confusing, further complicating a plot that already demands an unusual degree of patience and perspicacity from readers. I'm of the belief that the final book of a trilogy should answer some of the big questions posed by its predecessors in a satisfying way. Bakker

instead chooses to turn most of the answers he provides into even bigger questions that only future volumes can answer. That is one reason I found the book frustrating.

Another is that the sure grip on character that distinguished the previous books, especially *The Warrior-Prophet*, is less evident here. That is unfortunate, because the novel hinges upon deep transformations in character processes already set in motion within Achaman, Kellhus, Esmenet, and the Scylvendi, Cnaiür; in the dividing these transformations Bakker too often seems to be following equations whose workings are so clear to him that he need not fully set down the steps leading to a particular result. This approach left me feeling cheated at times of the opportunity to enter imaginatively into a character's experience.

The Thousandfold Thought concludes with a tour-de-force set piece in which Bakker cuts back and forth between the battle for Shimeh—which must count as among the greatest descriptions of sorcery in war ever recorded—and each of his main characters as they pursue their personal agendas in the midst of the general chaos, following paths that intersect and converge in a play of plot and subplot that is like the climactic movement of a symphony.

Readers will be grateful for the Encyclopedic Glossary, a nearly 100-page-long treasure trove of essential information about everyone and everything in The Prince of Nothing. An absorbing read in its own right, it's an indispensable reference guide for volumes past and still to come.

His Majesty's Dragon, Naomi Novik, Del Rey Books, mass market, 384 pp. $7.50. ISBN. 0-345-48128-3

Take Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey/Maturin series, in which the subtle warfare of Regency drawing rooms is made to seem nearly as exciting as pitched naval battles on the high seas, add air power in the form of intelligent dragons and their riders to the already volatile social and military mix of the Napoleonic era, and do it with a mastery of detail and command of craft more to be expected from a seasoned pro than a first-time novelist, and the result would be something very like Naomi Novik's impressive debut, *His Majesty's Dragon*.

After a hard-fought battle against a French frigate, Captain Will Laurence of the HMS *Reliant* finds himself in possession of a rare prize: a dragon's egg intended for Napoleon himself. Because the British Aerial Corps is outclassed by its French counterpart, which boasts some of the largest and most powerful breeds to be found outside China, where the art of dragon breeding has reached its highest development, the egg represents more than just a promise of prize money—with Nappy preparing for a cross-Channel invasion, England needs every dragon it can get. But the egg hatches before it can be brought safely to port, and the dragonet that emerges is impressed, much in the traditional McCaffreyan manner, by Laurence himself, who names the creature Temeraire. Thus ends a promising naval career, for his selection by Temeraire effectively drafts Laurence into the high-flying Aerial Corps, whose members are looked down upon by the other service branches, as well as by polite society.

Temeraire, a sleek black dragon of a mysterious breed, is born able to speak English and endowed with a lively curiosity about the world and his place in it that quickly wins Laurence (and the reader) over. Novik is at her best in delineating Temeraire's character and in showing how dragon sensibilities differ from human, as well as what the two have in common. Temeraire and Laurence's relationship is one of equals, each of whom has much to teach and learn from the other, and the bond that develops between them as they train for battle transcends mere friendship and comes to resemble the bond between people and their daemons in Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials* series.

Novik ingeniously adapts techniques of naval warfare to the air. Most dragons are so large that they are able to carry armaments and crew aloft, with the aviator acting the role of captain and his (or her) crew scrambling over the body of the dragon like sure-footed swabbies in a storm. Because the different breeds possess different levels of intelligence and offensive capabilities—some spit acid, for

Continued on page 90

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"[It] will appeal to both fantasy lovers and fans of erotic romance."
—*Publishers Weekly* on *Kushiel's Avatar*

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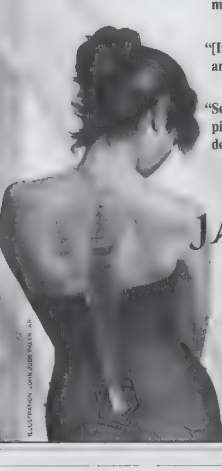

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Robin
of the
Green

"Guy!"

From horseback he looked up into the dappled green, but between the branches and the leaves he could see nothing

"Or should I say *Sir* Guy now?"

There was a movement among the green and Sir Guy drew his horse to a halt beneath one of the long branches that stretched over the path where he rode. Just visible now, as though he had melted out of the green itself, there was a lithe figure crouched among the leaves. The grin he wore flashed like a stray bit of sunlight. With perfect balance, he stood up on the narrow branch he had been crouching on and sketched a mocking bow. After a moment he leapt lightly back to catch the branch and swing for a moment, upside down, with his face inches from Sir Guy's, before dropping gracefully to the forest floor.

"You have been a *Sir* yourself more than once, so I'll thank you to keep your disdain to yourself." Guy's expression was halfway between a lopsided grin and a sour frown, but Robin only continued to grin.

"What brings you here to my humble abode, noble lord?" The grin had not left Robin's face and, instinctively, Guy's hands tightened on the reins so the leather of his tack and his gloves creaked.

"Officially? Hawking. Unofficially? To bring you news." The hint of sour look had not left Guy's face as though he spoke only grudgingly on behalf of the boy he had been, a shadow still inside the man he was now.

"Oh?" Robin tipped his head to one side and his bright eyes gleamed.

Standing thus he looked like a fox, Guy thought, his bright hair as wild as flame and his eyes sliding from brown to a shade of amber. For a moment the blacks of Robin's eyes were almost slits rather than rounds and Guy fought the urge to shiver.

"Yes, news." He spoke between nearly gritted teeth. "I am to be wed."

"Oh ho! And you have come to bring me an invitation?"

"I have come to ask you to behave!" Guy exploded in exasperation.

"Guy, you wound me to the quick!" Robin put his hand to his heart, feigning a knife blow and staggering a few steps over the forest green.

"Have I ever been anything but most courteous to you and Nottingham's court when a matter of great import is at hand?"

Guy did not answer, only frowned until at last Robin relented and let his face go grave. He placed his hand once more over his heart and raised his other hand.

"I give you my most solemn oath, I will give you no cause for grief I am witnessed by God."

A mischievous grin broke his face then and he let his hand fall. He did not miss the way Guy had winced at his vow.

"They have turned you with candles and crosses, I see. So soon you have forgotten the wilds? Soon they will have you swearing that such as I am don't exist."

Beneath the dappled light Guy's face had grown strained and pale. Seeing this, Robin backed off of his words. His face shifted from grave to serious and after a silence he spoke again, his tone gentled.

"If you will not invite me to your wedding, will you at least walk with me a while? Just to the edge of the wood," he pointed to a break in the trees ahead where the sun showed full and gold upon the grass. "You can rejoin your party there. I promise I won't let myself be seen."

For a moment Guy hesitated then nodded, urging his horse to a gentle walk so Robin could walk beside.

"Does your lovely maiden have a name?" Robin asked after a moment, glancing sideways to where Guy rode.

"Marion." Guy continued to look straight ahead to the sun-filled glade.

"Do you love her?"

Guy's head swiveled to face Robin, his eyes wide in the green-filtered light.

"What do you know of love?" He turned again, walking his horse more swiftly now.

Robin paused for a moment, tilting his head once more and the fox's light slid through his eyes. He did not speak but was silent until they reached the break in the trees and he hung back in the shadows of green as Guy stepped out into the sun.

"Is that one yours?"

Robin pointed to a shadow gliding against the sun.

Yes.

"Will you call her to you?"

Guy glanced at Robin suspecting mischief, but there seemed nothing but reverent respect in his eyes. His whole slender body was held waiting and still. After a moment Guy raised his arm and whistled a high call. The shadow of the bird turned and wheeled against the sun, plunging toward Guy's outstretched arm. A moment later the hawk's razor sharp talons were gripping the thick leather of Guy's glove. The hawk tipped her head, her bright eyes glittering in the sun and her russet and cream feathers showing their sheen.

"She's shy to anyone but me." Guy looked proudly on the bird as he spoke.

"She'll allow my touch." Robin spoke very softly, extending a finger as he did.

Guy nearly pulled the bird back, expecting her to scream and take to flight or snap her beak at Robin, but she did neither. As Robin had promised she allowed the touch, remaining still while he stroked the silk of her feathers.

"She's a beautiful bird." Robin spoke at last and there was a note of longing in his voice. "Take care that you don't lose her." He let his hand drop and stepped away.

"You had best rejoin your party. You will be missed."

Robin pointed to the trees opposite, where the leaves rustled and the sound of horses' hooves could be heard. Guy turned to answer, but Robin had already vanished and there was no trace of him against the green. With a sigh, he urged his horse forward and moved to join the rest of his party.

High, lonely music skirled from among the trees and drifted over the moon-drunk lands, reaching for, but falling just short of, the castle walls. In the branches of a tree limned with silver light, Robin sat cradled with his pipe against his lips and one leg dangling down to swing over the sleeping ground. After a moment he brought the instrument from his lips and turned his gaze to the castle walls. Light blazed from every window. There would be music there as well, but not his sort. There would be the smell of roasting meat and good wine and laughter and somewhere, Guy would be among them with his bride-to-be, Marion, at his side.

Robin closed his eyes, and etched on his lids he saw a summer field of years now passed, but near enough for him to reach out and touch. Long grasses sighed in the breeze and perfect star-shaped flowers turned their shimmering faces to the sun. The castle, as now, was in the distance and somewhere farther off was the sound of baying hounds that had already lost his scent and now cried for reasons they could not name.

There was another sound, too, over the hush of the grass and the song of the dogs. Perched in a tree, his head cocked, Robin listened. It was not a moment before he knew the sound for crying. Another moment longer and he saw the figure from whence the crying came—a young boy plunging heedlessly through the grass, fleeing the castle.

As Robin watched a face appeared, the features twisted and stained with tears. Over the face, a mess of dark curls hung tangled and falling into eyes as green as summer grass and magnified by tears. There was a look of the puck about him, almost fey, and Robin imag-

ined he could nearly see budding horns beneath the dark curls and the hooves of a goat hidden within the boy's leather boots

From the way the child held one hand to his backside, it did not take much to guess the boy's hide had been tanned for some misdeed and now he felt miserable and alone in a world turned against him. *What are they trying to mould you into, little man?* Robin had thought. *Would they beat the wild out of you?*

More than alone, the boy was in need of a friend. With a thought, Robin had changed his face, making himself young and he had dropped from the tree, to stand gnnning before the child.

Robin opened his eyes now, banishing memories and looked toward the castle walls once more. What did he want, for Guy to stay young forever, to always need that strange, wild boy who had been his only friend in the world? Or was it something else? Some other need, like the first strains of music, drifting out into the night?

Robin slipped from the tree to land lightly on the forest floor, tucking his pipe into the belt circling his waist. His feet made no sound on the forest floor as he crept closer to the castle, close enough to touch the stone, but never touching. The walls felt cold and iron bound them, guarding the windows and doors.

Robin moved silently to circle the castle and come into the wooded area behind it where moonlight made slender and beautiful the silvered birch trees and he could hear the sound of water running cold beneath the moon. By ear he followed the stream until the rush of water became heavier and scaled a tree there to watch the stream let into a little pond in a glittering fall. Moonlight glinted off the water in silver sparks and on the surface, water blossoms bobbed, stirred by the current and letting off a fragrant scent into the night air. Fireflies lit their lanterns in the dark and drifted slow and heavy against the dark, like a swarm of stars. Robin held his breath, waiting, though he did not know why.

At first the sound was soft enough that it was lost in the fall of water and the gentle sigh of the wind among the trees. After a moment, though, straining forward on the branch, Robin heard the softly sung snatches of an unfamiliar song. He watched as the song and the figure that sang it wove among the trees to come to the edge of the pond.

Her dark hair fell free over her shoulders, as silken as the water by which she now knelt. Here and there the light caught it, hiding stars in its length. Her hands were slender and white, luminous in the moonlight, and by her voice alone, if nothing else, he knew her for beautiful.

The song continued to spill from her lips and the very fireflies seemed to hang on the air, frozen, to listen. As she was crouched by the edge of the pond, her nimble hands moved. At first he could not see what she was doing, but after a moment he could see that she had laid cakes and gathered flowers on a flat stone by the pond. Lastly she drew a small clay pot from the folds of her dress, set it upon the stone, produced flint and struck a spark into the oil in the clay so a small flame wavered and burned. Breathless upon his branch on the tree, Robin understood. This was an offering and her song was a prayer.

Robin raised his pipe to his lips then and whispered song into it to join with hers. Her eyes were closed and she swayed slightly where she was. She seemed at once not to hear the music and to expect it as well. She was a naiad at her father's side, she was a dryad slipped from her tree, she was a priestess awaiting the presence of her god.

As her song came to an end, so did Robin's and she opened her eyes. As if the light in them called him, he dropped from his perch and stepped forward so she could see him in the light of the moon. He scarcely knew what guise he wore, goat-footed boy, fox's grin, golden Apollo, all three, or none at all. He only hoped that when she looked on him, she would find him beautiful.

Across the pond, the goddess gasped. The light in her dark eyes, silvered by the moon, was frightened and Robin felt his heart sink at her fear. Had she prayed and expected no answer? Did she leave funeral offerings for a dead god, or call to a live one? Was she happy behind the castle walls, or did she come here seeking to flee? Had she called him, or was it his loneliness and need that had called to her?

"Wait!" He called, stretching out a hand to her as she rose as if to run. She was a startled deer, trembling and uncertain, her eyes liquid and her skin shimmering in the light of the moon.

"I mean you no harm."

He stepped toward her and she did not flee and she was there still when he had crossed the pond to stand by her side. She glanced down and saw the pipe in his hand and through the startled fear and uncertainty he thought he saw a flicker of recognition, the shadow of a smile. He bent, not taking his eyes from her, and plucked one of the shimmering white flowers that grew beside the pond. Taking one of her hands in his, he pressed the blossom into it; his eyes locked to hers and he spoke very softly.

"So you will know it was not a dream." A smile touched his lips and danced in his eyes and before she could speak, he was gone.

Though it hurt him to do so, he left her alone. He would not push his luck. If there were spells in the air tonight, they would be laid by those words and anything further he could speak would only break them. When he had retreated far enough that she could not follow, he scaled a tree again and peered down at her. She stood for a moment longer by the pond, then raised the flower to her lips and let it brush there, breathing deeply of its scent. Then as though she were a dreamer suddenly woken from her dream, she turned and fled—keeping the flower pressed close to her heart as she did.

The spell had been laid. Whether she thought him god or vision or dream, he did not know and did not ask. Robin watched the castle through the next day and returned to the glade and the pool by night and watched more by the light of the moon. And at last, like a ghost, she came to him—half dreaming and half awake. She did not speak, but her eyes shone and there was a smile upon her lips, which, by the moon, were as dark as the skin of plums.

Robin circled her with his arms and plucked flowers from beside the pond and wove them in her long, dark hair. The fireflies were their stars, flickering beneath the sheltering boughs of the trees. She was a deer, slender and lithe, but no timid doe this time. He was a buck, he was a fox, he was an eagle in flight, he was many things he was unable to name and she matched them all, form for form, in her waking-dreaming mind. Her lips were the sweetest wine and her flesh sweeter still. He was drunk as he had been so many times before, aching with love that overflowed its bounds and left him dizzy and dumb and blind.

Whether she left him in time or he left her, he did not know. Robin only knew that he woke diamonded with dew and naked in the light of dawn and he was alone. The morning air was fresh and chill, but he wasn't empty or afraid. The music of his pipe was the song of birds. He was light and merry between the trees. There had never been a day more beautiful.

There were storms gathered on the horizon and they shadowed Guy's brow as he sat at the window with his chin resting on his fist, gazing out into the gloom. He could ask for Robin's head and the sheriff would give it to him, but the memory of too many summer fields lurked inside his mind. His insides roiled, as dark and terrible as the clouds, and it left a sour taste in his mouth and made his stomach ache.

Full of impotent rage, he rose to pace before the fire, which fought off the chill of the day. Marion was with her women and he had been invited to an early hunt, a race to beat the storm, but he had declined. Now as sullen as the clouds, he sulked in the castle alone with murder written in his eyes.

Suddenly decisive, he spun from the fire and crossed to the table, seizing a scroll of parchment and a pen. He fought to keep his hand from trembling, fought to make the script look delicate and smooth, like Marion's hand would. Once the ink had dried, he rolled the paper into a tight scroll and, taking with him a length of ribbon,

descended the castle stairs and went out to the pigeon house and took hold of one of the birds He tied the note to its leg and then let it fly over the castle walls He did not know whether his ruse would work, but his heart went with the bird, as heavy as lead, though wings beat and the pigeon lifted into the sky—oblivious to the weight it carried

Robin's eyes tracked the bird across the sky and his heart went with it. There was purpose to its flight and love sped its wings. He could tell from where he was crouched in the tree and knew at once from whence the bird had come Raising his arm, he whistled a high call and the bird turned against the sky and fluttered down to rest lightly against his skin He unbound the note at its leg and let it fly once more, unrolling the scroll and reading the script there

Guy has gone hunting for the day. Meet me in our glade.
Marion

Robin's heart leapt. He was still drunk and blind, as drunk and blind as he had been since the goddess had first drifted from the castle walls and come to pray at the pool for a god to come. He had lost count of the nights when they had met It was all no more than a beautiful, dizzying dream. Dropping from the tree where he had been crouched, he hurried through the wood on soundless feet and made his way to the pool where the water splashed and glittered in the sunlight

The glade was empty to Robin's sight when he arrived and he set himself to watch the castle's walls, so he could catch the first sign of her coming Overhead among the green leaves, birds wove their song into the light of the day He raised his pipe to his lips and played a few light notes and let it fall again

With his eyes fixed on the castle, Robin did not see the shadow that melted out from the trees behind him, or know that he was anything but alone He did not sense another presence in the glade until cold metal touched his throat There was iron in the blade and Robin hissed, trying to pull away, but he was held fast with the dagger's edge against his skin

"What have you done to her?" A voice hissed in his ear. "What spell have you bound her with? What fey magics have you used to charm her? Tell me!"

The grip that held him slackened for a minute and Robin spun around to face Guy's blazing green eyes Guy's features were twisted with rage and his body trembled. His knuckles were white around the blade, its point still facing Robin.

"No tricks, no spells " Robin gasped His hand went to his throat and beneath his touch, the flesh felt raw and burned

"I asked you to behave! I asked one favor of you, for all our years of friendship, and this is how you repay me? You make a fool of me? You make a cuckold of me before I am even wed?"

"I did not know her name!" Robin cried.

"And when you learned it, did you stop?"

Guy spat the words and across from him, Robin's eyes too began to blaze, the golden brown eyes of a fox cornered in its den.

"It was she who came to me! Did you know that behind her pious smile she prays to the old gods? She prayed to me and I answered!"

Without warning Guy raised the hand holding the knife and, though he kept the blade turned away, struck Robin full across the face with the weight of it in his hand. The other staggered back and blood bloomed at the corner of his lips With his agility and his strength, Guy knew that Robin could kill him with a single blow, but rage had left him as blind as love had left Robin and he was beyond caring His pride had been wounded to the quick and some other indefinable thing within him had been touched as well and was now left bleeding and raw

Through the blood, Robin only grinned a wicked grin, and Guy struck him again. The other crouched back on the ground, gazing up at Guy standing over him. If nothing else, Guy knew he still had the iron in his hand

"Do you love her?" Robin's eyes mocked from the ground and he wiped blood from his face as he grinned up at Guy

"You dare to speak of love? You know nothing of love!" Guy roared, leaping at Robin Robin caught him easily and the two rolled over on the ground, so that Guy was pinned now beneath Robin Robin's hands were at Guy's throat and there was a darkness in the fox gold eyes that Guy had never seen, shadows he had never guessed at.

"Love? I know nothing of love?" Robin's face was inches from Guy's, so that pinned, Guy could feel the hot breath of every word and the fingers about his throat trembled.

"I know more than any mortal heart could bear "

For a moment there was silence between them All the rage drained at once from Guy, leaving him empty and cold, and Robin's fingers were moving from his throat. The shadows had driven the golden fire from Robin's eyes and he rose to let the other stand The fire gone, Robin's eyes had turned the color of ash, holding the memory of fire, but cold as a hearth devoid of flame

"I could have killed you I could still, and take her from you " His voice was barely a whisper, stirred by the summer breeze

"And I you." Guy's voice and eyes were equally flat and cold. He held the blade where Robin could see it, then with sudden violence he cast it down so the point stuck in the earth and the hilt trembled.

"This is not finished between us."

He turned swiftly upon his heel and stalked up towards and castle and Robin watched him until he was gone

Marion did not come to him that night and Robin watched the castle walls and from his perch in the tree he howled as the moon rose and drifted silver through the sky In the castle two lights burned through the night, one in a high tower room and one at the opposite end of the castle, both bounded by iron, both containing mysteries Robin had never seen

He dreamed the past and saw the fey boy with dark curling hair and summer green eyes Farther back still he dreamed and saw slender beauties slipping between trees, with golden hair and sky blue eyes, with flaming locks and emerald gaze, with night black tresses and violet sight They rolled across his hills, sketched in fire and each one burned He watched until the dawn rose in the sky, a cold distant light, then at last he dropped stiff and sore from the branches of the tree.

A figure was crossing the cold dew laden lawn towards him and for a moment, Robin's heart leapt When the figure came closer though, he could see it was Guy Wind ruffled his dark hair and his green eyes caught the shadows from the swaying branches over head, leaving them dappled like the forest floor. There was no weapon in his hand now, only a page of ivory-colored parchment torn from a book, which he held out to Robin

"The old stories are all true " Guy spoke and his voice was hoarse It was, and was not, a question.

Robin reached for the wind-stirred page The ivory was marked in bold, black ink and above it the text had been beautifully illuminated in red and blue and green and gold. It was a scene from the pages of mythology, a scene from the past. It depicted a goat-footed and horned man in pursuit of a lithe and beautiful woman She was naked, save for her golden hair, which did nothing to hide a face that was full of fear In the illustration, she was fearing not only for her virtue, she was fleeing for her life.

Cruelly the illustration had twisted love, so the pan's face was lecherous and his body swollen with unabashed lust. Without seeing the book it came, from Robin knew that in its pages the old gods were mocked. The old gods—the dead gods—burned upon crosses with their temples thrown down, lest their debauchery and evil ways stain the present and lead men and women astray

Robin let the page drift to the ground between them, where it lay curled like an ivory leaf, forgotten by the fall. After a moment Guy stooped and picked it up. Even in the shadows from the

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THE BOUNDARIES OF MANHOOD VARY FROM CULTURE TO CULTURE, AND IT'S UNCERTAIN WHERE TRUE MANHOOD LIES. DO YOU NEED TO LOOK LIKE A MAN TO BE ONE?

PAVEL PETROVICH

BY DANIEL HOOD

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS COCOZZA

AFTER A WHILE IN THE CAMPS, NOTHING IS STRANGE. The weirdest things start to seem normal, so when you see something new and strange, you just shrug and get used to it. It's like you can't be surprised anymore—which is good, because surprises are always bad. To be truly strange in the camps, you've got to be a million times stranger than anything in real life. I only ever knew one guy like that. He was strange at the beginning, and he only got stranger, right up to the end.

His name was Pavel Petrovich. He was from far out there, you know, beyond the beyond—way out by the Bering Straits, one of those places where people don't say what town they're from, they say what region.

And it showed, too, because he was a real hayseed, a bumpkin if ever there was one. He couldn't read or write, and didn't quite get electricity. His father was a trapper or something, and Pavel Petrovich grew up out there, beyond the beyond, with the savages, the Kalmuks or Yakuts or whatever they call them. I don't know how he managed it, but he lived with the tribes all his life, never was a Young Pioneer or joined the Comsomol, never had all that crap about the Revolution pounded into his head.

He was full Russian, though, blond and tall, with bright blue eyes. Healthy as an ox, no TB, no STDs. Muscular, too, all lean with a couple of scars. He was handsome, if you like that kind of thing. When they stripped him and hosed him down on the parade ground the day he arrived, the fags started whistling and drooling. And because he didn't have any tattoos at all—he didn't belong to anybody—the gangs started wondering who he'd end up enforcing for.

Ended up nobody. He could have been a big soldier, but he wouldn't take a tattoo from anyone, though the Moscow boys said

they could get him out of work detail if he'd fight for them, and the Ukrainians said they could double his food ration, and the Chechens offered him unlimited cigarettes.

He told them all to piss off. All he wanted to do was serve his time and get out. He was in for beating up a surveyor from Gazprom, because the guy had disturbed some of his traps or something. Didn't even kill him, but you don't beat up somebody from Gazprom, particularly in Siberia. They sent out border troops in a helicopter to hunt him down, and he was probably lucky they didn't just shoot him. Instead they beat the shit out of him, tried him, and sent him to our camp. Five years.

So he wouldn't take a tat. At first, the gangs thought he was just negotiating, and they didn't give him too hard a time the first few days. He had to work like the rest of us, but they didn't touch him.

The first day he went out to work, we were cutting timber for some local contractor. Sometimes, when a guy has just come in, and he's done time out west, say Petersburg or Moscow, he can't believe they let us work outside, and he thinks it's great—fresh air, a little sunshine, maybe even a chance to escape, that kind of thing. The jails back west might as well be underground. But then they haul his ass out before dawn, and rattle him around in a truck for an hour or two in the cold, and then give him a saw that's mostly rust and splinters, and whip him when he doesn't cut fast enough, and his hands start to bleed and he's in mud up to his ass and his feet are numb, then he doesn't think it's so great.

Pavel Petrovich liked it.

His hands were like leather, and he must have cut trees before because he knew the rhythm, and he could make even those rusty saws cut well. I was his partner, and I could hear him humming a little tune under his breath. When I started slacking off, he hardly noticed—just pulled harder. I swear he cut faster without me.

Anyway, when they gave us the soup at noon, most of us just collapsed where we were, and wondered how the hell we were going to make it through the rest of the day. Pavel Petrovich, though, takes his bowl and goes off a little. Not too far, mind you, but away from the rest of us.

He was barely touching his soup, and so I wandered over, thinking maybe I could grab a little. A lot of guys when they first get here can't eat the food. So I go over, and he's staring off into the distance. Through the trees, kind of, like he can see all the way to the Martimes, to Vladivostok or Sakhalin or whatever. Anyone could see what he was thinking about.

"Don't even try it, friend," I tell him. "See those guys?" I point out the dozen perimeter guards: the ones with the rifles. "They're old line." They were, too—some of them wore Stalin pins on their tunics, and there was a picture of Old Joe in the guardroom. "They're real good shots, because it's a crime against the Revolution to waste bullets."

He shook his head, and it took him a minute to come back from wherever he had gone. "I thought the Revolution was over."

"Tell them that."

He shrugged. "I was not thinking of escape. There are rabbits out there."

I asked him how he knew, and he said he could smell them. Like I said, he was a strange one. When I asked him if he was going to eat his soup, his face went all cold and he drained the tin bowl in a gulp.

"I must keep strong," he said. "Five years is a long time."

WE DIDN'T BECOME FRIENDS OR ANYTHING. HE DIDN'T want any friends. But he started to come to me for information. And he needed it, too, because after a day or so the gangs started making their final offers.

Pavel Petrovich told a delegation of the Moscow boys to piss off again, and they explained that they would have to kill him if he really meant it. They even explained that the other gangs would do the same, which was pretty polite of them. They don't usually explain that much, but there was something about Pavel Petrovich that drew explanations out of you. You could kind of tell that he wasn't getting it, that some basic point was going over his head. He wasn't stupid—just alien. From beyond the beyond.

So the next day, we were cutting trees again and he spoke to me during the break, told me what the Moscow boys had said to him. "How do I get them to leave me alone?"

I had to laugh. "If I could tell you that, brother, I wouldn't be here." He stared at me, not getting it. "You have to join a gang, man."

"Why?"

"Because that's the way. They're like ... tribes. You have tribes out there, right? Among the savages?" He nodded. "That's what it's like here."

"None of these men are from my tribe."

"Find a new one. Any of them would be glad to have you. Choose one." I pointed out some of the men around us, and the tattoos that told who they belonged to: the Petersburgers' polar bears, the knife-in-the-heart of the Chechens, the Ukrainian saber. I told him how to tell a man's rank from the position of his tattoos. I told him how to tell what was meaningful and what was

I TOLD HIM NOT TO EVER LET ANYONE PUT A SPIDERWEB ON HIS CHEEK, SINCE IT MEANT THE MAN OWNED HIM LIKE A WOMAN. "ANYTHING ELSE IS FINE, EXCEPT A STAR."

just decoration—how the portrait of Ivan the Terrible that covered the chest of a Kazakh was just nostalgia, but the tiny hammer and sickle under his right eye meant he was big in the hardline apparatchik gang, and meant he would get preferential treatment from the guards. I told him not to ever let anyone put a spiderweb on his cheek, since it meant the man owned him like a woman. "Anything else is fine, except a star." I showed him mine, on the back of my hand. "That's Army. You can't have that unless you've served. But any other tat's good. Just choose one, and get a gang."

His face screwed up all the while, like I had suggested he do something nasty to his mother. "I will not be painted. That's dangerous magic." He shuddered. "It changes a man."

"For fags, maybe. Or spikers. They get weird shit done when they're high. Otherwise, it's just a sign. A uniform."

Pavel Petrovich shook his head. "No. It's changes a man. And a man can't join another tribe anyway."

"If you're alone, they'll beat the shit out of you."

And they did. The Moscow boys came after him the next day, after roll call in the yard. They closed in a circle around him, and everyone else edged away, knowing what was coming.

He fought like an animal, a real animal. A wild animal, I mean. He kicked and bit and scratched, but not like a girl. Like an animal. The Moscow boys were surprised at how much he fought, and he hurt a lot of them, and they were going to kill him, but he fought so long the guards finally got around to breaking it up.

His face was meat the next day, and he carried himself stiff, like something was broken inside, but he worked the whole day without complaining.

At noon he came over to me and asked who led the Moscow boys.

"Black beard, red windcheater," I told him. "Mashkarov. But you'd never be able to kill him. Anyway, one of his lieutenants would just take over."

Pavel Petrovich shrugged. "I don't want to kill him."

And the next morning, after roll call, he goes over to where the Moscow boys are getting ready to kill him, and he points to Mashkarov. "If you come against me with your men," he said, "I will come for you. Just you. Before I die, I will tear off your balls, and eat your soul."

The way he says it is pretty scary, and it seems like a pretty good bluff, except we all know he's going to die without getting anywhere near Mashkarov, because Mashkarov just steps back and sends his boys in.

There's maybe twenty of them, and Pavel Petrovich watches Mashkarov while they surround him. He doesn't move a muscle, just stands there, and it got really quiet, the rest of us watching like it's a train wreck about to happen—this guy is going to go out hard, right?—and then the first of the Moscow boys touches him, punches him in the face, and he goes wild.

I've never seen anything like it. The day before he'd been crazy like an animal, out of control, hitting anything that came close. This time he's still crazy, but all in one direction, straight at Mashkarov, and he's pulling twenty guys with him, or throwing them out of the way, or grinding them underfoot.

Twenty guys, and he gets through. He's all blood by that time—blood in his hair and his eyes, in his mouth (with part of someone's ear), his hands are soaked—but he gets through, breaks free of twenty guys and throws himself on Mashkarov, who's pale as a ghost by now, and thinking twice about standing his ground.

Pavel Petrovich doesn't give him a chance. He leaps on him, a flying tackle puts a hand between Mashkarov's legs, and Mashkarov's bellowing, and then he's screaming, and then the guards get there. One of them has to stomp on Pavel Petrovich's arm five times to get him to let go of Mashkarov's balls, and then they have to club him unconscious because he won't stop trying to get them back.

IN A WAY, PAVEL PETROVICH WAS LUCKY IT WAS THE Moscow boys he started with. Mashkarov's gang wasn't too popular with the guards just then, and they thought it was kind of funny that he couldn't walk right for a while.

They put Pavel Petrovich in the solitary room at the back of the TB ward for a month, and he had a chance to heal in peace. The day before he came out, one of the guards went to Mashkarov and gave him a message. "He says he doesn't want to fight, but if you make him, he promises to take your balls this time."

Mashkarov turned green and looked away.

Some of the Ukrainians approached Pavel Petrovich when he got out, and congratulated him on what he did to Mashkarov, and told him they wanted to talk to him later about joining them.

At lunch he came to me and asked who led the Ukrainians.

At dinner he went right to Repin and explained that he didn't want to join, and that he hoped Repin wouldn't make him come after his balls.

GUYS LIKE THAT DIDN'T LAST LONG, USUALLY. THERE was one, a paratrooper who was in for stealing equipment. He'd been in Afghanistan through the whole show, even been captured once and tortured, and he figured if he could take on the towelheads, he could handle a bunch of broken-down prisoners. He took the Army tat out of loyalty, but he couldn't get it through his head that we were just one gang among many. He kept mouthing off, making threats, getting into fights. As long as there weren't too many on the other side, he won, and when there were too many, we had to back him up and save his ass.

Finally, it got to be too much, and we let it be known that Army wasn't going to protect him anymore. That very night, someone slipped in among our bunks and cut his throat and gouged out his eyes.

They tried to do the same thing to Pavel Petrovich. Two times they sent guys to get him after lights out. The first time it was a single Kazakh, a hireling who would work for anyone, and he came back without an ear. No big deal.

The second time it was a whole bunch of Ukrainians. Now I wasn't there—I was in a different barracks—but we heard the screaming from across the yard, and I got the story the next day from the guy who had the top bunk across from Pavel Petrovich. Both of them were crowded right up against the roof.

It seems the guy woke up in the middle of the night from a dream. There was a little light from the moon off the snow outside, and he looked around and saw Pavel Petrovich crouching on his bunk, hunkered down with one hand up to brace himself against the ceiling. The guy said his eyes were shining, and then he closed them and sniffed, a big deep sniff. The guy blinked, and Pavel Petrovich was gone—off his bunk, nowhere to be seen.

A couple of seconds later, the Ukrainians show up, six of them, all around the bunk. They reach up to get Pavel Petrovich, but he's not there, and next thing you know, one of the Ukrainians shouts something, and then a second screams, and a third, and they scatter.

But somebody tags each one in the darkness—nothing serious, a punch or a bite or a little jab with something sharp—but each one gets touched, and they're all shouting, or screaming. When the guards get in and throw on the lights, there's six petrified Ukrainians huddled in the corners of the barracks or under bunks, and Pavel Petrovich is back asleep.

The guards march the six Ukrainians off for punishment for being out of their bunks after lights out, and everyone else settles down. My guy in the bunk opposite says Repin and the rest of his boys were up all night, shivering in their blankets. He swears that he didn't see Pavel Petrovich get out of his bunk, but he must have, because sometime between the attack and reveille, somebody slipped into the middle of the Ukrainians' territory, past twenty or thirty guys sitting wide-eyed in their beds, and left a present at the foot of Repin's bunk. It was a little stick figure of a man made out of willow bark and twigs, with a scrap of cloth tied around the ball of bark that was the head.

Don't ask me what it means. I don't know. But it scared the shit out of Repin, and he left Pavel Petrovich alone after that.

MOST PEOPLE DID. EVERY NOW AND THEN SOMEONE would get stupid, or some new guy would try to prove himself, but it was like he had eyes in the back of his head. No one could get close to him when he was alone, and if they tried it in a group—at a meal, or in the delousing room, or the showers—they were lucky to take their meals in liquid form after that.

So things quieted down for Pavel Petrovich. He spent his time watching his back, and watching the taiga, and hunting. I'll get to the hunting in a minute, because it's worth hearing about, but first you have to hear about how he watched the taiga.

When we were in the yard for the day, he would stand at the fence and scan the countryside. He wasn't staring at it; there were guys who did that, spikers or burnouts or men about to crack—he was running it. One of my Army friends was the first to call it that, he said it was like Pavel Petrovich was reconnoitering the terrain, like a soldier about to go into battle. They thought he was planning an escape, and for a month or so there was heavy betting on when he'd tried to go over.

That died away, because he didn't go over. Pavel Petrovich was a model prisoner, except for the occasional fight. All he did was stand at the fence and stare out at the cleared space around the compound and the endless birches beyond them. Didn't matter if it was winter or summer, he was always there, watching the taiga like it was a TV show.

This one time, I saw him do something weird while he was watching. It was winter, about six months after he came in, and he was the only person in the yard. I was looking out the window, and I

saw him suddenly stiffen up, like he was coming to attention. That was how I thought of it, but looking back it was really more like a dog lifting its head when it's caught a new scent

He looked out the fence to the east, eyes fixed on something in the middle distance. There was nothing to see, just endless snow and the silver birches, but he turned and started trotting along the fence, with his head turned out, following something with his eyes. He went all down one side of the yard, made the corner, and kept going

One of my friends had smuggled in a pair of field glasses—no one ever figured out why, though he managed to trade them later for a bottle—vintage Zeiss, from the old days. I borrowed them and went to another window, where I could keep an eye on Pavel Petrovich

He was still jogging along the fence, and I trained the glasses out where he was looking These were good glasses—I could see the spots in the bark of individual birches, count their branches—and I swear there was nothing there. But Pavel Petrovich still followed, halfway around the compound

This went on for about ten minutes—him following some invisible thing outside the compound, me following him inside the bar racks—until finally he stopped. He put his hand out, close to the fence, the way you do when someone's train is pulling away from the station. He stood there for a long time, and I guess it kind of drove me crazy, because I left the barracks and went to join him at the fence

He turned when I was halfway there, saw it was me, and let me approach.

"What the hell are you looking at?" I don't know why, but I was angry He shouldn t have been staring out the fence like that—he should have been inside He should have joined a gang and taken a tat "There's nothing out there "

Pavel Petrovich looked at me like I was stupid. "Meat," he said. And then he looked down and saw the field glasses, which I'd forgotten to hide, and laughed "You'll never see anything with those "

Right after that, he started hunting

He caught mice and rats in the camp at first, using just his bare hands There were a lot of them, but they were smart, vicious little monsters, and the bigger ones could take a chunk of your finger

We mostly tried to ignore them. Pavel Petrovich ate them He spitted them on sticks and cooked them on the heating stove in his barracks. It was disgusting to look at, but the smell of roasting meat was amazing. So much spit flooded your mouth you could barely talk We didn't get a lot of meat.

A couple of guys tried to catch them themselves, and ended up with mauled fingers, one had the tip of his nose bitten off. Only Pavel Petrovich could do it, and he couldn t seem to teach the method, which seemed to consist mostly of being very still and very fast. He was willing to show anyone who asked, but you couldn't learn anything from watching him sit there, under the barracks or out back of the kitchens, just sitting until a rat poked its nose out, and sitting a little more until the thing emerged, and then reaching out in a flash and snapping the monster's neck If you did it alone, either the rats didn t come out, or you couldn't catch them, or they wriggled free, or they bit the shit out of your fingers

So only Pavel Petrovich could do it, and he ate like a king

He also, at last, started showing a little sense. There were a lot of rats and mice in the camp, and he could catch more than he could eat, so he started trading them. Not very well, since he was a hayseed, and didn't really get how hungry the smell of his meals had made us. Besides, there wasn't much he wanted. He never asked for anything, just waited to hear what a guy had—a little bit of salt, or a better blanket, or a pair of socks with fewer holes in it, or a bar of soap. He didn t drink or do drugs, but he would smoke cigarettes now and then. Sometimes, if the guy had nothing, Pavel Petrovich would share his meat if the guy cooked the meal

Slowly, people got used to him and forgot the battles of the early days. The Ukrainians traded with him, and, come spring, even the Moscow boys. They couldn't resist, because in spring, Pavel Petrovich started bringing in real meat.

As soon as snow began to melt, they put us out on work crews We had a job repairing a highway the first day, and at lunch Pavel Petrovich went out into a stand of birches We thought he was going to take a leak, but he came back with a rabbit. Don't ask me how. It was a skinny little thing, wasted from the winter, but everyone who saw it forgot all about rat meat

He brought it straight to me. "How do I get some wire?" he asked I thought he meant for a garotte, so I said I could get him a half a meter or so, because I knew a guard who used to serve in my unit He shook his head. "More Ten meters And cutters. And a sack "

I couldn't figure out what he wanted it for, but that rabbit was calling out to me. So I promised, and ate the rabbit that night with my friend in the guard. They didn't get much meat, either, and their pay was always a few months behind. He got the wire the next day, from the camp stores

Pavel Petrovich made snares out of it. Any time we were going to be on an outside job for more than a day, he laid snares, and he would come back with game in the sack. The guards knew about his hunting now, so he had to share with them, but there was still more meat floating around that camp than ever before, and we all started feeling fat and happy

That went on all year.

Pavel Petrovich settled in, and stopped seeming like such an oddball. He didn't stare out the fence as much, because he was hunting a lot, and people were willing to overlook some weirdness in return for a steady supply of meat

ANYWAY, NOTHING MUCH HAPPENED TO PAVEL PETROVICH

for a while, until the next spring, when they brought in the Kid

The Kid was from beyond the beyond, like Pavel Petrovich, but he was an actual native, a real savage with black hair down to his ass. He was in for murder—apparently, the winter had been hard where he was from, and he had stolen a pig from a Russian settler, and when the settler came to get it back, the Kid killed him The guards had to carry him out of the truck, and he was fighting all the way, even with all the chains on him, and screaming at the top of his lungs in his weird-ass language Pavel Petrovich heard the screaming and bolted out of the barracks like they'd just announced an amnesty. It turned out he spoke the Kid's language, and when he started jabbering away, the Kid calmed down enough that the guards didn't have to club him to death

Pavel Petrovich tried to take him under his wing after that He showed the Kid around, taught him the routine. And he spread the word that the Kid was off limits to the gangs

Not that any of us wanted him. He was a little runt and couldn t speak Russian We called him the Kid because we couldn't pronounce his name. We figured he and Pavel Petrovich could be a gang of two, and maybe there'd be more meat

The problem was, the Kid couldn't handle prison. They say some of those savages go crazy when they're locked up—they waste away, starve themselves to death, pining for their freedom The Kid was going crazy, but he didn't starve himself At first he just moped around, following Pavel Petrovich like a dog, but he couldn t adjust to the fences and the roll calls and the work details and being shut in with a hundred guys at night, so he started to booze

We didn't get rations of vodka, but the guards did, a lot of it, and they would trade, so there was enough to go around And Pavel Petrovich would give the Kid meat all the time—just gave it to him, didn't make him hunt or anything So the Kid took the meat and started trading some of it for bottles

At first he did it in secret, but you can't hide that kind of thing, not when you have it as bad as the Kid did Anyway, the savages can't hold their liquor, so Pavel Petrovich found out soon enough We'd see them a lot, the Kid with his head down, pouting and sullen, and Pavel Petrovich arguing with him, but it never did any good The Kid

just got worse and worse, until he was giving up all of his meat, and was drunk all the time

Finally, Pavel Petrovich came to me, pretty desperate "The vodka is ruining him."

"It ruins a lot of people."

"If I ask, will people stop trading with him?" It was a stupid question, and he knew it "What if I stop hunting? Spring is here, and the game is coming out What if I stop?"

"You'd make a lot of people angry."

"They cannot hurt me." He said it offhand, like a thousand hard men were no more than a bunch of little girls. He was such a hayseed, I had to laugh

"They can hurt the Kid." That hadn't occurred to him It set him back, and I felt bad about it. "Look, you should drop him. He's no good. He's falling apart."

"It's this place It can ruin men like us." He meant him and the Kid, not anybody else

I got angry again, I don't know why. "Drop him He's just a goddamned savage. If he wants booze, let him get a cobweb and whore for it."

Now he got angry He grabbed me and shook me. "Never. You with your paints You're hardly men anymore." Some of my friends came up, and Pavel Petrovich realized what he was doing He let go. "That magic is too strong. You cannot trust it. A man forgets who he is."

"Not me," I said. I didn't know what he was talking about, but I didn't like it. "I know who I am. It's your little friend who's screwed up. Drop him."

PAVEL PETROVICH DIDN'T. HE WAS COMMITTED TO helping the Kid, saving him from himself He told him that there would be no more free meat to trade, unless the Kid quit drinking. They had a big fight, right out in the yard, shouting and screaming, and the Kid started taking swings at Pavel Petrovich. He wouldn't fight back, but the Kid wouldn't stop trying to hit him until the guards separated them.

After that, the Kid wouldn't talk to Pavel Petrovich. The first thing he did was go to the Chechens and ask to join up I guess he went to them because they were the men in the prison who were the least Russian, who looked the most like him. He went right up to their boss and pointed at the guy's cheek, the knife-in-the-heart there, then back at his own clean cheek

The Chechens thought the little pantomime was pretty funny, but the Kid kept it up, serious about joining them, until they got angry. They would probably have killed him, except he remembered the Russian word for meat That got their attention. They figured that if Pavel Petrovich could hunt, then a real savage could hunt even better, and maybe they could break his monopoly So they got the Kid good and drunk and waited for the meat to roll in.

Except the Kid was useless—either too drunk to catch anything, or too hung over to hunt This went on for a week, until the Chechens got sick of it, beat the shit out of him, and then started renting him out

After that, he sank pretty fast. Pavel Petrovich tried to help him, even once bought him a bottle in the hopes of getting him to stop whoring But the Chechens owned him by then Anyway, some guys just can't help themselves. Not with whoring, I mean, just in general The Kid sank

Early in the summer, while he was passed out, the Chechens tattooed a cobweb on his face When he woke up and saw the tattoo, he went crying to Pavel Petrovich, begging for help But Pavel Petrovich took one look at the tattoo and never spoke to him again.

By the end of the summer, the Kid was dead. He stole a pack of cigarettes from a guy to trade for booze, and the guy gutted him. No one thought much of it. Men get killed all the time Anyway, after a while that kind of weakness gets embarrassing, and you want it to go away.

FOR ANOTHER WHILE NOTHING MUCH HAPPENED TO Pavel Petrovich. He still hunted and traded, though he drove harder bargains now. He spent a little more time at the fence, maybe, or slacking off when we were outside on a work crew. Otherwise, it didn't seem like the whole thing with the Kid affected him. He just soldiered on, counting down the days like the rest of us. He had adjusted, resigned himself. Two more natives got brought in during the winter, and when the guards asked him to translate, he did—but no more The natives were put in a different barracks, and he treated them the same as he treated everyone else, which is to say he ignored them. They joined the Chechens, and got tats

The next spring, he got TB

I WOULD HAVE GUESSED THAT A TENTH OF THE CAMP had it, though no one ever talked about it. If you had a cough, you ignored it until it came up red, and then you waited a day or two hoping it would go away If it didn't, you went to the ward About half the men who went in came out, which was pretty good, considering.

That spring, a bunch of foreigners came to visit the camp, doctors from the U.N. We spent a week cleaning things up, digging new latrines farther from the barracks. We got extra rations every day, to fatten us up.

HE WENT RIGHT UP TO THEIR BOSS AND POINTED AT THE GUY'S CHEEK, THE KNIFE-IN-THE-HEART THERE, THEN BACK AT HIS OWN CLEAN CHEEK. THE CHECHENS THOUGHT IT WAS PRETTY FUNNY.

When the doctors came, they examined every single man in the camp. They all wore white masks, and washed their hands in bottled water heated on a stove between each examination It took a week and, at the end, they decided that something like a third of us had TB

One whole barracks was emptied and turned into another ward, and the U.N. doctors stayed an extra week to explain things—how to keep things clean, how important it was to stay on the schedule of medications, that sort of thing The guards and the medics and the commander of the camp listened and promised, and the minute the doctors were gone, they forgot all of it.

The thing was, the commander and the guards got a lot of money out of the work crews, and there was no way they were going to have half the men lying around in hospital beds, and no way they were going to waste time following a bunch of stupid rules Besides, the medication fetched a good price outside the camp, so a lot of it went out the gates. Unless you were spitting red, you went out to work and you didn't get your medication, and if you were spitting red, you got the same treatment as before

Pavel Petrovich had one of the milder cases, so he still went out to work. It was a miserable spring, rain every day and mud up to your waist, and the overseers worked those of us who weren't sick twice as hard. He lasted all the way up to summer, long after most of the others who'd been diagnosed gave in, but finally it got too much. He had a coughing fit while loading timber onto a flatcar, and couldn't stop, and passed out.

They took him into the ward, and he didn't come out as a man alive

It was an easy place to die The medications, when you got them were complicated, and there was a strict schedule. But when a man's lungs are rotting, he doesn't want timetables. Some men took all their pills at once, figuring to knock the disease out of them. Others couldn't be bothered—they gave up, too weak to care. The medics were no help, a bunch of kids and idiots from the countryside, barely educated.

Thirty or so members of our gang went in, but most of them came out eventually, because they were used to discipline, and our leader Galitsyn, had had a little training in the Army. He kept the men on the schedule, whether they wanted it or not, and he made those of us who were healthy help out. The other gangs forgot all about a man who went in

One day while I was feeding broth to a friend, Pavel Petrovich called me over. He was bouncing a couple of pills in his hand.

"It will cure me, this magic?"

I shook my head. "There's no such thing as magic, brother."

"There is magic all around," he said, and then he coughed for a minute or so, and wiped blood off his hand. "I have seen it. Where I am from, all the doctors use magic."

You had to .augh. "Those are witch doctors. It's not the same."

He didn't give in, but he didn't want to fight anymore. "Will it cure me?"

"Yeah, but you have to take them in the right order, at the right time." I pointed at the schedule next to his bunk, which was printed in English on one side, Russian on the other

"I cannot read."

So I explained it to him, and after that I checked in on him to make sure he kept to the schedule. It was easy, because he wanted to believe, and he wanted to get better. I didn't have to coax him, couldn't let it go. "We can't let those Moscow shits do this. He's a good man."

"If he's such a good man," Galitsyn asked, "where are his tats?"

Which pretty much closed the subject, as far as Galitsyn was concerned

In the end, it was probably the right decision. We were weak at the time and Mashkarov held a lot of cards. Besides, it didn't matter

Pavel Petrovich got weaker and weaker. I visited him from time to time, and he didn't complain about not getting the pills, or ask me to try to get some for him. He shrugged when the pill cart passed him without stopping. "That magic isn't for me," he said once. "Perhaps I will get better without it."

He didn't, of course. TB, in that place and in his condition, was a death sentence. So he struggled on for a long while, into winter, getting thinner and thinner. His coughing fits grew worse. The sound was terrible, like a cement mixer in his chest, wet and grinding. It's a terrible sound. You don't want to be around it. I stopped visiting him as much

Sometime in December, when I hadn't been to see him in a week or two, he sent a medic to ask for me. I went the next day and brought a bottle as a gift. He didn't want any, so I helped myself. The burn took some of the edge off the smell, and the blood on his sheets, on his chin

"How are you?" Stupid question. I couldn't meet his eyes

"I can no longer be a man," he said. "I want to be tattooed."

I was so anxious to get out of there I didn't really think about what he was saying. "No one'll take you."

"Not from any gang here. A special tattoo."

I HAD TO GET THE TWO NATIVES. THEY CAME INTO THE ward, making signs against the evil eye or whatever, and jabbered away for a good hour with Pavel Petrovich. It seemed to me they

SOMETIME IN DECEMBER, WHEN I HADN'T BEEN TO SEE HIM IN A WEEK OR TWO, HE SENT A MEDIC TO ASK FOR ME. I WENT THE NEXT DAY AND BROUGHT A BOTTLE AS A GIFT.

or shove the pills down his throat, the way we had to with some of our guys who had given up. I just gave him the word, and he took whatever pills it was time for.

He would have gotten better, I'm sure of it. Almost everyone who did the full course of pills the right way did, and he was stronger than most to start. By the time they actually let him into the ward, though, and put him on the pills, he looked pretty weak—and Mashkarov noticed

Was he waiting all that time? Probably. He still walked a little funny, and every time he saw Pavel Petrovich, I bet his balls ached. He was just too afraid to do anything about it until he saw Pavel Petrovich coughing red, looking like a skeleton, and stuck in a bed in the ward

All he had to do was make sure Pavel Petrovich didn't get his pills. That wasn't hard, he was in favor with the guards again, and Pavel Petrovich had no gang to back him up—so one day, the pills stopped coming, and the next day, they moved him to the terminal ward

I saw his empty bed and thought he'd died, until someone told me where he'd gone. It didn't take long to figure out that someone had arranged it all, or to figure out who. I was ready to cause some trouble when Galitsyn took me aside

"We've got a lot of men sick. We can't have any trouble now."

"It's no trouble," I said. "They have to give him the pills."

"Mashkarov spread the word—no pills. And we're not going against Mashkarov now."

In the camp gangs, discipline is pretty strong, sometimes stronger even than in the Army, and Galitsyn didn't leave any doubt, but I were arguing with him, but who knows? Maybe that's how savages tell jokes

Anyway, after an hour or so, they agreed to whatever it was he wanted, and Pavel Petrovich paid them. He still had a little surplus left from the days when he hunted—a couple of cartons of cigarettes he'd never smoked, extra socks he'd never worn, a good warm coat, even a gold Swiss wristwatch—and they got most of it.

I followed them out. "What does me want?"

The older one had learned a little Russian. He was putting on Pavel Petrovich's gold watch. "Strong magic."

"Yeah, yeah. For what? And why did it cost him so much?" The watch might have gotten him some painkillers, or a good last meal, or a decent burial

"Strong magic," the older one repeated. He was a stringy guy, tough and leathery, with a permanent squint. He kind of shivered. "Too much."

"For what?" Pavel Petrovich'd asked for it, but I couldn't help feeling they'd screwed him somehow.

"You see. You see."

They wouldn't say any more than that

I kept an eye on them.

They made the rounds of the tat artists to find a guy who'd do Pavel Petrovich. It was pretty hard, because no one who was healthy wanted to go into the wards. Finally they found a guy from the old days, a doddering old wreck who claimed Khruschev had signed the order that put him in. No one believed him, but

he said it all the time anyway. His name was Constantin. He was pretty shaky, and he insisted on having two gauze masks and two pairs of surgical gloves to work in.

The natives got him all that, paying with Pavel Petrovich's cigarettes, and then they got started.

Constantin went into the ward one morning, looking like a surgeon in his mask and gloves, with his needles and shit. The natives left him there. I stuck around to keep an eye on the old guy, which was a good thing, because he was a shitty tattooer. He kept cutting Pavel Petrovich, and stopping to clean everything up, and then starting again and cutting him a minute later.

"He's going to bleed to death before you finish," I said.

Constantin laughed. "I haven't done this since the '70s."

"He will get better," Pavel Petrovich said.

He did, which was a good thing, because it turned out that the tattoo was supposed to cover Pavel Petrovich's entire body. I figured that out when they stopped that first day. Constantin had finished his right leg, and when he'd cleaned up, he smiled and said, "Tomorrow, the other leg. Then the stomach. Then the chest. Then the arms. Then the head, and you're all covered, eh?"

I waited until the old guy left. "What's he talking about?"

"My tattoo."

I pointed at his legs. "You're really going to have that shit all over your body?"

Pavel Petrovich sighed. "It won't be my body for long."

With talk like that, I figured he was sinking. You don't want to be around a guy like that, one who's sinking, so I left.

BACK IN MY BARRACKS, SOME OF MY FRIENDS STARTED

joking about my girlfriend in the TB ward, and I told them to piss off, and then someone asked if I wanted to go to the dance with the other savages.

Turned out the two natives hadn't just hired Constantin. While he was inside working, they built themselves a fire and danced around it, a little rain dance or war dance or whatever I didn't believe it at first, but the next day, while Constantin worked on Pavel Petrovich's other leg, I waited outside and watched.

It was just like my friends said. The natives came out first thing and built a little fire in an oil barrel, and threw in a couple of cigarettes, and then they danced around it, singing weird chants just like real Red Indians. They didn't dance all day—just an hour or so—but they did it every day. Then they doused the fire with vodka, and sprinkled dirt on it, and went off to lunch or work detail or whatever. At first people thought it was funny, and stood around staring. After a while, they hardly even noticed.

This went on for about two weeks, while Constantin got closer to finishing his work, and Pavel Petrovich got closer to dying.

I stopped in every day for a couple of minutes. I don't know why I did, since it just made me angry. Pavel Petrovich held himself very still while Constantin was working, and the effort was enormous. A TB cough isn't something you just hold in. Sweat poured off him, and his face was pale, and his lips were bloody from biting them to keep still. And from his lungs, too, I guess.

Anyway, he was sinking fast, and the effort was helping, but he wouldn't listen to reason, so I stopped talking. When I came by I just watched the tattoo grow.

Tattoos, really. I'd never seen this much tattooing on a guy. Pavel Petrovich was getting it everywhere—the soles of his feet, the backs of his knees, his ass. I'm surprised that didn't kill him alone, because getting a tattoo hurts. I don't know what it's like outside, but they use pretty crude instruments in here, and it hurts like a bitch.

So every day he's getting weaker. Paler, thinner, his eyes sinking back in the sockets, his voice going. After a week he can't keep from coughing, so he has to warn Constantin to stop, then cough for a long time, wipe away the blood and black stuff, and let Constantin start again.

It was disgusting. Toward the end, I stopped visiting. The last three days I stayed away, right after Constantin started working on his head. I just wanted him to die, to get it over with.

On the last day, when they finished their little dance, the natives went in to see Pavel Petrovich, and when they came out they said he wanted to see me.

What was I going to do? Not go?

YOU ALMOST COULDN'T TELL HE WAS DYING—YOU

couldn't see enough of him to tell. Constantin hadn't slumped on the ink, particularly on his face.

The rest was animals. A herd of caribou on his chest, foxes wrapped around his arms, hawks circling his shoulders, rabbits and voles and mice making dens on his legs. They weren't very good—Constantin wasn't very good. They looked like those paintings cavemen did, legs too skinny for the bodies, the heads too big.

His face was different, and a lot better. It was a wolf's head, lines to make his nose look long and skinny, with a pad at the end (which must have hurt more than anything I can imagine), drawing out his eyes to the side, fangs on his lips, shading under his chin and along his jaw to thin it out. It was weird, but he looked like a wolf. His eyes were all shiny too, bright like an eager dog, though that might have been fever.

He was pretty much dead at that point; he just didn't know it.

"My friend," he said. He couldn't sit up, could barely wave a hand at me.

"Pavel Petrovich."

"I am still a man." His voice bubbled.

"Yeah." I started to panic. I didn't want to talk to him.

"Not for long."

I told him to shut up, but he wouldn't.

"You must stay a man." He gasped for breath; the sound made me sick to my stomach. "Look at me." He flapped his hands, trying to point at the new colors of his skin. "You must stay a man."

I took a deep breath, held down my breakfast. "Yeah. You too."

When I left, he was smiling like I had made a bad joke. It was the last time I saw him. Outside, I puked on the steps.

ANYWAY, THE NEXT MORNING PAVEL PETROVICH WAS

gone. Before you (or I) get all misty, I mean that literally. He was gone. Disappeared.

I had a lot of nightmares, and woke up early in a sweat. Before roll call, I ran over to the ward. I don't know why—maybe to apologize, or just to say goodbye properly.

The best thing about the TB wards, the only real benefit, is that they let you sleep in. So the lights were out, the shutters closed, and the only sound was the slow, ragged breathing of the doped up dying.

Pavel Petrovich's bunk looked empty, and I thought he was already dead, that they had carted him out in the night, and I felt like shit.

They hadn't, though.

There was a shadow on the sheets, something crumpled up. I thought it was his clothes, and it made me angry to think they were going to bury him naked.

They weren't, though.

I went to get the clothes, but it wasn't clothes, it was his skin.

I touched it before I knew. It was dry and slick and cold, like the thin skin just beneath the outer layer of an onion.

A medic came in and flicked on the lights.

You could see the tattoos, though they were all shriveled, with nothing to hold them up from the inside: shriveled foxes, shriveled hares, shriveled caribou, and the shriveled face of a wolf. I didn't puke, but I got out of there as fast as I could. I went straight to the savages.

"What did you do to him?"

Continued on page 89

Years after it happened I relive the moment It is the same past and present—I see my freckled hand reach toward the water girl s Me in a green dress that made my eyes shine, gold around my neck a necklace my Jonathan gave me at the end of the school year Her, below me, skin like wet quartz and hair drifting like pond grass I dream about it when lightning flickers across the sky lighting my lake I feel her touch cool and smooth and softer than anything solid, then hard and unyielding and pulling I am her for a moment one terrible moment of her wrenching me away from everything I knew I am a settler's daughter, curious about the haunted lake wanting to be special and willing to do so much to be so.

Then I hear a yell and was in the water and I watch a girl in a dress the color of agate splash loudly and cry for her beloved, who runs to her and wraps her in school colors until he can get her home I watch her walk away her footprints in the sand filling with water, my Jonathan never knowing the difference

She should have thrown my necklace back to me when she threw his heart back at him The children she bore with my body moved away and didn't look back until they gave her back to me When I touched her ashes, they turned to lye, or so I tell myself I took her back into the water as water takes everything back.

And now there is nothing of me to remember but a few links of gold somewhere far from the shore

If your dreams have deserved you
maybe you can still help
someone else's dream come true.

"You have to let me go back! I can't just sit here and get out of shape!" Nadine yelled. Her mother didn't reply, she was probably taking a moment to roll her eyes and sigh Nadine couldn't see from upstairs They'd had this same argument every day since she recovered enough to fight. "I won't do anything we aren't doing in PT. I'll take it easy Just let me do a few laps—"

"If you try to swim at a competitive level, you'll rip your knee to shreds and there's no chance of your even walking again not for years! You'll have to wait until the doctor says you're ok Take it easy for a while Mermaidme You'll get there again."

"Don't call me that stupid name if you won't let me practice." Nadine shouted down the stairs Good thing this fight was upstairs She wouldn't ask her mother for help to get back to her room She braced herself, then threw her shoulders into slamming her door

It felt good to make a noise.

She leaned against the door eyes starting to sting. "Too much chlorine in the pool," she said to herself, a running joke with the girls on the team It wasn't *fair* The other driver hadn't even been scratched She hadn't done anything wrong That idiot man in the red car hadn't

Imagine

BY CATHERINE KRAHE ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC FORTUNE

been able to stop on ice He'd been the one who kept both his legs, both whole, both just as useless as anyone else's. Her legs had been special She had been special. Her friends had been in the car with her, two divers who couldn't hope to have her powerful kick, and they were training even now. They hadn't been hurt. No, it was Nadine, who needed that leg, who had championships and options and who knows, maybe the Olympics—probably the Olympics, to be honest, she knew she was good. Had been good. Before it all went wrong

"I'll have my knee back," Nadine said quietly She was lucky to have it at all She wouldn't argue that—she kept the X-rays in her closet and pulled them out every few days to remind herself that she'd almost lost the leg entirely. Lucky her She just .. she just wanted to bob around in the water, see if she could move freely, like she always could. It wasn't just swimming, not entirely The only time she ever felt anything like her old self was in the therapy pool If the woman ever shut up and let her listen to the water in her ears She could close off the upper world and think of how good it would be, once she could move again

Nadine wiped her eyes. It wasn't fair, it wasn't fair, it wasn't *fair* and she was lucky it wasn't worse. She had to remember that At least she was home, with a mother she loved That should have been enough—it was more than enough for some people It would have to be enough She was alive No one had died in the accident She still had something like a leg. Or her mother's favorite at least she would have a useful degree after the next year. She'd have something to show for her college years besides scar tissue. She hadn't pinned all her hopes on a swimming career.

Just the ones that mattered

I once wore a dress the color of the trees at midsummer and reached out to a girl eternally drowning I once read books and danced

Now I touch the shore lightly, my fingers the kiss of afternoon rain Now I wear a necklace of minnows. Now I watch fat tadpoles grow strong legs for their own ballet

Sometimes, children tell stories of the lake The Indian ghost—a chief, or a princess! The boy who drowned because he took a canoe out at night, against the troop leader's warning Don't worry, kids, it's just stones. Sometimes you'll see something that looks real, but it's just sunlight and shadows on rocks

I am not trapped here Dunno rainy springs, I used to flow through the puddles and drains to watch people All water connects to all water Still, I know these stories better I am these stones.

Nadine limped along, trying not to put weight on her bad knee She had a bad knee now The doctor had said she could walk Walking was good for her, he said, even out in the woods between their house and the lake where she might break an ankle She still didn't walk much. Swimming was so much easier, so much faster, just to be in motion and free, like she could move like that forever. Now, with her crutches, she dragged herself everywhere like a slug

She sat on one of the log benches where the shore turned to grass. The lake had been so much fun when she was little She had learned to swim in it and returned every summer until competitive swimming called to her When her gerbil died, she came here. When her father left, she came here. Not always to swim, but to feel the water and know that it was part of something bigger Thousands of creatures lived in the lake, not caring about whatever upset her. Their lives went on whether she watched them or not It didn't comfort her as much now as it had when she was little

A fish jumped by the ancient dock and she watched the ripples disappear About half the skinny little girls in her grade school had been afraid to swim in the lake Fish would eat them, or worse, *touch* them, the bottom was gross, a girl drowned there . Nadine threw a rock in the water It sank with a hollow noise, she didn't throw another

She heard another splash by the dock, a second fish startled for one reason or another. Maybe there was a predator in the water, something with teeth and blood on its mind When she looked—

—a girl, pale and thin-skinned like a frog, with wet hair and long fingers Nadine froze and watched a minnow dart around the thing's throat, just one bead in the necklace. The creature watched her with eyes like pond water, leaning on her arms at the edge of the dock. Nadine could see the water where her legs should be, where her stomach should be, where the rest of the thing should be

She rose shakily and shuffled back to the house as fast as her leg could carry her.

I scared her. I scared her badly, all unthinking. The sun does not warm me—why bask? The dock cannot support me—why lean? I can do nothing but watch this girl, this child I remember, all smiles and splashes, bright barrettes and black braids She laughed when she was small. Once, she jumped into water without looking and sputtered to the surface. Her mother was afraid I tried to hold her, but she would not be held. She shouted and smiled. Mama, look! I can do it! And she could.

I have tasted her tears and taken them into me as I do everything I have heard her cry. It isn't fair. It is never fair.

I will never see her again. I know this, and I sink to the shadows away from the dock where secrets are kept, waiting to be brought to life May she smile again, this crying child

There was nothing good on TV, not at all. Nadine could hear her mother in the kitchen, humming show tunes and making cookies. As if that would make it any better—she wasn't a little girl anymore She'd just have to get used to her new body

She had lost the battle, the war, everything They'd finally let her try and watched her swim, taking it easy, taking it slow, but taking what she could Her body didn't move with the water Her kicks were uneven. She stopped after the first lap and walked away from the pool. Where had it gone? She'd once been able to live in the water She'd always been able to live in the water. And now.. and now

"You ok, hon?"

She shook her head and her throat closed. "I wanted it to work I wanted it to work *so much*" Her eyes burned and she closed them

"I know, I know," her mother said, wrapping warm arms around her The couch shifted when her mother sat next to her and Nadine shifted to lean on her. "It hurts and there's nothing I can possibly do to make it better"

"It's wrong It felt all wrong Worse than when I was first learning."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Mermaidine You looked good out there Out of practice, but good, and I remember what you looked like when you doggy paddled. You'll get better."

"It won't be the same"

Her mother's sigh echoed in her ears "No, it won't be You've known that all along, You're lucky to have your leg still. I came so close to losing you—" Nadine raised her head for a kiss, "—and don't think I don't know how lucky I am to have you."

"I know I just wanted it to be back, I wanted it to work, it's not the, the same at all and it never will be—it isn't *fair*—"

"Of course it isn't." Her mother pushed her up and looked at her "You're lucky and I know you know that, deep down. But it isn't fair It isn't kindergarten, hon. Life doesn't bring enough candy for the entire class and wait for everyone to take a piece You don't get to choose everything about your life. You're already head and shoulders above most of the people in this world, and you didn't choose that You can't look back so much. If you cry all the time, you won't be able to see new chances You don't always get to choose the big things

"I know, I know, starving children in Sudan—"

Her mother laughed. "I didn't mean it like that, Mermaidine Or do you want me to avoid all mention of things aquatic and let you sulk? What'll make you happy?"

"You could give me cookies?" Nadine made herself giggle, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. Too much chlorine "Or a bionic leg?"

"I can definitely do cookies."

I hold no few bones within me. Fish die and dissolve, the flesh eaten from their bones by worms and other fish. Larvae of all types cast their skins into the water and become something else. Some of them fly away and I never see them again until they return to give me their pearl children. I recognize them as I recognize anyone else. Each does the same, summer after summer. Frogs eat the flying adults and die themselves, and creatures of the land join me in their time.

I watch cranes stalk fish and taste blood in the water. I put on human appearance, as much as I can, as meaningless as it is, and crawl along the bottom.

Sometimes I do not miss my life so much. On the lake floor, where there is little sun, I can listen to the quiet. Here, the bones are of young love; dramatic children fling their feelings away, wrapped in paper or pins, and cry for them the next day. Some weep more, but there are tokens that should not be discarded so lightly, with anger and huffs and pointing fingers. See how little I care? See what I did? See what you made me do? See me?

I take their gifts as what they are not and what they are and what they would have been. I never threw mine away.

Muggy August hemmed Nadine in, it was too hot to stay outside for long and she was sick of the house. Sick of everything. Her friends visited, talking about next season when they relaxed and let themselves be themselves. They left, taking hugs with them, and she was alone with the heat and her mother and nowhere to duck her head under and listen to her heartbeat in peace.

There wasn't anything she could do but keep moving. Kitchen, couch, be unreasonable at her mother, drag herself up to her room, stare at her medals, leave before she broke another trophy, couch, kitchen ... Sulking wouldn't bring her leg back. There wasn't any thing she could do to be—to be *right* again, as close as she could come to perfection. She'd keep going, she always would, but it wasn't the same. It wouldn't be the same ever again. She'd lost a few races in the first seconds, diving in wrong. She could tell when she did that, and she'd done it now. No matter how hard she worked, she'd never get past this. She'd never be right again.

Her mother's worries made the house unbearable. The lake would be more comfortable, with a breeze off the water. She wasn't staying away because of the hallucination or whatever it was. She wasn't afraid of it. Nadine repeated it to herself as she walked.

She dipped her cane in the water, trying not to make too many ripples. "You can come out now. It's all right," she said to no one, then a gust of wind blew up a wave and the water girl. Her skin was wet quartz and her eyes held slippery sunlight on the lake floor. Nadine started breathing again and walked onto the dock. The water girl wasn't frightening. She wasn't anything at all.

Just a ghost or something. A girl who drowned long ago and wanted to be saved. She wore a gold necklace this time, some thing solid to anchor her to the dock. Her hands looked strong, though Nadine could see the bones through her skin, and they didn't look human. The water girl looked up with her eyes reflecting the sky and that sad, sad face, all her blood gone into the lake.

Nadine reached for one slick hand and pulled.

She is here and she is touching me, as I once touched a drowning girl to save her soul if not her life. She breathes and straightens, and I grasp her wrist with fingers that could be claws and there is balance, neither of us moving, both of us able to pull the other into a new world. Water spiders flick into us, riding the surface of the water with the same balance, suspended in change—

—She is Nadine, this girl, this Mermaidine, she is broken, she is a swimmer, she is nothing, she doesn't know who she is anymore. I feel her flow into me, tasting, drinking, feeling and testing her as she tests me—

—a father's strong hands under me in the water—a feeling of weightlessness and strength a trophy, plastic but more than I've ever had for something I did all myself -triumph again as my professor finally admits that I have a valid point—a scream of pain that never stops but becomes a heartbeat and footsteps, one heavier than the other.

Her life spins out in droplets, casting a rainbow in the light, and we understand each other. I could rear back and pull her into the lake, let her see what unfair can be. She knows this and pauses. She knows, and I know.

I withdraw. Water spiders dart away; crayfish disappear in clouds of silt. I am not the one who so callously took my life. I am not, and I hope I shall never be.

Nadine's hand shook as she pulled it back from the water girl's quartz-pebble skin and sat down, pulling her legs out of reach. She had been so close—she'd known that girl. She could still feel the kiss her Jonathan pressed onto her hand. She knew the curiosity about the lake ghost, the need to help—no, that was her own, and maybe the water girl's. They were so alike, and so not. She pressed her hands into her eyes and couldn't tell if the wetness on them was salt or fresh. The first time she wore that dress that matched her eyes began to fade away. One breath of lakewater that spread through her body—Nadine sagged in relief when those sharp edges softened, but they took more with them. The smile on her Jonathan's face, looking forward to a life she'd known was perfect for her, everything faded. The water girl was melting away from her, and she had to remember something of it, and all she had was the horror of watching someone else's son throw her ashes over the water. She had known something, something of loss and surface tension, beads of water across her hand, but she would lose it all, like she had lost everything else she'd tried to hold onto. She had been *so close*, so close to something new—

The water girl looked up at her when she opened her eyes. She sank lower, dodging Nadine's legs as she swung them off the dock, but Nadine shook her head and reached out again. She might not have this chance tomorrow. She might not remember this tomorrow, and she had to. The crash was just a false start, and here was the real one, the dive that counted. Whatever happened, it would be something new. She stretched, but couldn't reach anything but the girl's shoulder, all sharp bone for all it looked soft.

She blew out all her air and leaned forward into the water, not letting go.

I rose from the water, clutching the dock, dripping wet. I laughed, I think, and I sputtered, and I cried for the one who was Nadine before me. The lake pushed me up as I climbed the ladder, not caring about the pain in my leg—my leg!—or the splinters I knew I would get. I splashed, I shook water from my head and saw a rainbow in the drops, I breathed and lay on the wood and loved the sun on my back. I'd missed it so much, my sun, my life, any life, her life.

She made no sound, though I knew she was there. I turned and she rose from the lake, looking down at her hands. "Thank you," I said, and she looked up.

She smiled with sunlight patterns as I never could, though something slid from her eyes. She knew she'd lost something traded it for what she was now. Whatever I had been. She stretched farther into the air before her own weight brought her down with hardly a ripple. I stood too, leaning on my cane, raising my arms to the cloudless heavens, and when she turned to fly along the lake floor I did the same, carrying myself to a life that had once been hers.

I would not waste this gift, and I hoped the same for her. Perhaps she lies on the lake floor, crying pebbles. Perhaps she watches me, eyes and teeth sharp, her prideful thoughts of a new life forgotten. I never found perfection in myself. Or, perhaps, she has traveled to the ocean and races dolphins in the sea.

Sister of the Hedge

FAITH CAN BE A HARD TASKMASTER, AND DOGMA CAN CLOG THE PATHWAYS TO BELIEF, BUT A TRUE VISIONARY CAN ALWAYS SEE THE LIGHT.

BY JIM C. HINES
ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC DESCHAMPS

TALIA STOOD AT THE EDGE OF THE WOODS, both excited and repulsed by the sight before her. The Accursed Hedge was an enormous mound of brown and purple that blocked all but the snow-dusted tips of the distant mountains.

Talia shouldered her pack and hiked onward. The land around the Hedge had been cleared long ago. Rotting, insect-infested stumps dotted the field. Farther on, the ground turned brown and barren, as though the fairies had drawn an invisible line past which grass could not grow.

A cluster of buildings sat amid the field of brown. Four long, wooden dormitories sat to either side of a tall church. The Church of the Iron Cross. From here, she could barely make out the dull gleam of the cross atop the roof. Harnesses bound two tiny figures to the steeple as they scraped rust from the cross.

Talia hadn't set foot in a church for five years.

A man and a girl walked out to meet her. They both wore the rough, handspun robes of the church, but the man's clothes were adorned with gleaming brass buckles, and he wore a long hunting knife strapped to his waist. A wooden cross with iron bands on the ends hung from a silver chain around his neck.

"Impressive, isn't it?" he asked, once he was within range. He yanked Talia's head down and tied a small wooden cross around her neck with a leather thong.

"Yes," she said tightly. Years of restraint kept her still as his fingers pulled the knot tight.

He snapped his fingers. "Impressive and evil. Look hard, girl. Never forget this Hedge is the work of the Devil."

What right did he have to talk down to her, like she was a mere child?

"I am Brother Samuel." He stared at Talia, taking in every detail, from her ragged black hair to the clumsy, hand-sewn repairs on her leather boots. "This is Lilly. She will show you to your cot and answer any questions you have about your new life." He started to turn, then paused. "I trust that is why you've come? To join the church and serve the princes?"

"It certainly wasn't for the pleasure of your company."

Samuel sniffed. "You've an arrogant air about you. No doubt your family hopes you'll learn some humility."

"No doubt," Talia agreed. She waited until Samuel started to walk away, then added, "I certainly understand why *your* family sent you away."

Lilly let out a yelp of surprise as Samuel whirled. His fingers were like claws, reaching for Talia's head, but then he caught himself. Voice low, he whispered, "Despise me if you like, girl. But you will show me proper respect as a member of the church and a servant of the princes, or I'll have you thrown upon the thorns. Understand?"

Talia clenched her jaw. She couldn't afford to argue, not if she was to survive here. She lowered her eyes. "I apologize for my rash words."

Still muttering, Samuel stalked away, leaving Talia alone with Lilly. Talia adjusted her pack. "Well? Aren't you supposed to show me where I'm to live?"

Lilly nodded quickly. "He wouldn't really throw you into the thorns, you know."

Talia's blood still thrummed through her veins. She kept both hands wrapped around the straps of her pack so Lilly wouldn't see them shake.

"I'm so glad you're here," Lilly went on. "You'll be able to see me take the Oath of Servitude next week. You have to serve for thirteen weeks before you can take it. Thirteen is a sacred number here, you know."

"Yes, I know." Did she think Talia had spent her life in darkness?

Thirteen weeks, thirteen fairies Twelve good, one evil The good fairies had supposedly gifted Princess Aurora with beauty and grace beyond measure. One, the spurned fairy, had cursed the princess out of hatred and spite

"You don t act like you want to be here " Lilly s mouth was pursed, almost a pout Then she smiled "Silly me You've had a long journey I doubt I was all sunshine and smiles when I arrived in the spring "

Talia didn't believe it. She had known girls like Lilly, blindly cheerful through any circumstances. If Lilly were burned alive, no doubt she would babble merrily about the warmth and the beauty of the flames

"My uncle brought me," Lilly went on. "We came from the north I spent nine days in his old wagon before we reached town The front left wheel squeaked like a mouse with every turn, but it was worth it to serve the princes and live amid such a battle between God and evil

They reached the edge of the field, and now Talia could see why grass didn't grow around the Hedge

Dry, tangled vines blanketed the earth While the Accursed Hedge itself was a deep purple, these secondary thorns were a dull brown, with spots of tiny, dark green leaves

way, held in place by heavy, square nails Candles flickered in nests of thorns

Beyond the altar hung an enormous cross, the ends capped in iron. Brittle vines surrounded the cross, but at a distance, as though the cross had driven them back

Four tile mosaics decorated the floor in the middle of the nave. The first showed an infant being embraced by a king In the second, a young girl sat at a spinning wheel. The third depicted a purple mountain beneath a dark sky. the Accursed Hedge The final mosaic foretold hope and redemption. A young man led the princess forth while the Hedge burned behind them and angels sang from the clouds.

Talia shivered The stone walls leached the heat from the air This was a cold, hard place, more like a fortress than a church.

Alien though the church might be, the mass itself was familiar Even after so many years, the Latin phrases still came automatically to her lips As the service progressed, Talia found her attention wandering back to the first mosaic. The baby Aurora, her picture nothing more than a scattering of tile, made her queasy.

Maybe Lilly had been mistaken. Maybe she had lied, a way to test or taunt the new arrival

The Church of the Iron Cross was different from any church Talia had ever seen. Dried vines bordered every window and doorway, held in place by heavy, square nails. Candles flickered in nests of thorns.

"Don t worry, these aren't enchanted like the Hedge," Lilly assured her. "Samuel and the others have tried to kill the overgrowth, but there's just too much "

A few steps later, Talia's foot caught in one of the vines, and she fell Thorns scraped her legs and palms, like dozens of tiny knives. She yanked up her right hand, but that put more weight on her left, driving the thorns deeper.

"Oh no!" Lilly grabbed her shoulders and helped her up "You have to learn to walk here Take high steps, like soldiers marching." She used the hem of her shirt to dab at the blood on Talia's forearms "I'm so sorry I should have warned you. Especially in your condition "

"What condition?" Annoyed, Talia yanked her hands away from Lilly's inexpert care

"The twin boys you carry in your womb "

Talia nearly fell again "That's impossible!"

Lilly's round eyes filled with shock and chagrin "I'm sorry I didn't mean ... sometimes I see things. It's the Devil in me, I know, but I've never been wrong. My parents hoped the church could drive it from me. Talia, I ... Talia? What's wrong?"

Talia pulled away so hard she nearly sent Lilly sprawling into the thorns "Say nothing of it. *Nothing*."

Lilly started to cry "I wouldn't. If they knew what I could do, they might send *me* away, too."

Talia clenched her fists so tightly that new blood dripped from the scratches Without another word, she walked onward.

TALIA DIDN'T SPEAK TO ANYONE UNTIL THE FOLLOWING DAY. A few girls tried to talk to her, but Talia ignored them, and they didn't try very hard. She spent the night in a crowded longhouse with the rest of the Initiates and followed them to church before sunrise

The Church of the Iron Cross was different from any church Talia had ever seen. Dried vines bordered every window and doorway, held in place by heavy, square nails. Candles flickered in nests of thorns.

Even if Talia had believed Lilly to be capable of that kind of cruelty, one look at the girl would have changed her mind Lilly kept glancing back at Talia between hymns Dark shadows marked her bloodshot eyes. She had spent the whole night in the chapel, no doubt praying for deliverance from her curse. Clearly, Lilly believed in her visions.

Deep down, so did Talia. It was all she could do to keep from crying

After the mass, Brother Samuel called the Initiates to him "After morning mass, we bathe our charges." His eyes never left Talia He seemed annoyed at having to explain Of course, the rest of the girls knew all of this already. "You are about to enter the presence of royalty. You will obey any order given by one who wears the iron cross." He fingered the cross around his neck, still watching Talia "Disobey the rules or disrespect the princes, and you will be punished "

Spinning sharply, he led them toward the Hedge

There were no paths among the thorns That morning, Talia had found a pair of wood-soled sandals at the foot of her cot. They were uncomfortable, but they protected her feet better than the thin boots she had worn before. She concentrated on walking like the others, and managed to make it to the Hedge without stumbling

The wind shifted Talia wrinkled her nose

"The smell of Satan," Samuel said, spotting her expression. "The smell of evil."

Talia rolled her eyes Human waste and rotting flesh Unpleasant, but hardly evil Or if evil was to be judged by scent alone, Talia had known many a peasant who was in league with the devil She noticed Lilly staring at her again and deliberately turned away. Why couldn't everyone leave her alone?

"Do not touch the thorns," Samuel said. "A slip in the field will leave you scratched and bloody. A slip at the Hedge, and you will be scarred forever." He pushed back his sleeves, to reveal deep,

dark ones about the wrists and elbows "I was fortunate. I attempted to follow my prince, to save him. I spent months abed before I recovered."

Talia swallowed. Up close, the Accursed Hedge drove all else from her mind. The vines rose like a wall twenty times the height of a man. Near the base, many were thick as trees. The lowest thorns were spears as thick as her arm.

Yet it wasn't the solid wall she had expected. Even at a cursory glance, she could see gaps among the purple vines. She had already noticed at least four places where someone her size could slip between the thorns.

They walked around the Hedge, circling toward the rising sun. After a while, Lilly whispered, "He must be taking us to Prince Jerome."

Talia said nothing.

"I'm sorry about what I said." Lilly bit her lip. "You really didn't know?"

Her face tight, Talia shook her head.

"You should tell Brother Samuel. It's bad luck, here. The curse doomed Princess Aurora as an infant. It could do the same to your babies. The fairies will come for you, and—"

"Have you ever seen a fairy?" Talia snapped.

"They stay away. The church drives them back. But then, no infant has ever been allowed near the Hedge."

Thankfully, they reached their destination before Talia had to endure much more. Samuel brought them together in a half-circle, facing the Hedge.

A crate sat beside a square wooden platform. A full water barrel nested in the vines next to the crate. On the platform, a Sister stood maneuvering a pole into the Hedge.

"Prince Jerome was in his fourteenth year when he came to free the princess," Samuel said. "He was slender and quick, and sought to slip between the thorns. He made it deeper than many before the Hedge seized him." He bowed his head in quick prayer. "Lilly, would you take over for Sister Margaret?"

Joy suffused Lilly's face, but her voice remained humble. "Thank you, Brother Samuel." Her hands trembled as she stepped onto the platform and took the pole.

Talia moved away from the other girls, trying to see. The best view seemed to be from beyond the water barrel. She crouched and peered through the tangles.

Talia thought she had prepared herself. She had seen animals slaughtered before a feast. She had watched executions in the town square. How much worse could this be? She gasped when she spotted the prince.

He was naked and emaciated, his skin tight as canvas on tent poles. Either the Hedge had torn his clothing away, or the Sisters had done so. Talia guessed the latter. Given his situation, clothes would have quickly become an added torture.

He stood sideways, one leg extended as if the Hedge had caught him in midstep. Two thorns pierced his thigh. Another pinned his left arm to his side. Only his right arm was free. The bicep rested on a young vine that curled back on itself. Bloody scratches marked the arm. Older scars criss-crossed the skin, nearly the same shade of purple as the vines. His head twisted to face the girls. Water matted his tangled brown beard.

He squinted at Lilly. "You're a pretty young thing, aren't you?" His voice was harsh, and he made whistling noises when he spoke. Talia could see where a needle-like thorn passed through his throat. "How would you like to come back later, to dance for a prince? What's your name, girl?"

"Lilly, m'lord." She finished fastening a brass bowl to the end of the pole. Adjusting her grip, she struggled to dip it in the water, then began to slide it through the Hedge.

The prince leered. His manhood hardened and brushed against a narrow vine. One of the girls giggled nervously. "Don't be shy," he called out. "You can all dance for Prince Jerome!"

Talia's fists clenched. She wanted to reach in and drive a thorn through his tongue.

Suddenly, he grimaced, as if in pain. Several girls gasped. Samuel's face was stone, and Sister Margaret simply began pulling rags from the crate.

With an odd whistling groan, Prince Jerome defecated onto his leg. Lilly's hands began to shake, and Talia lunged to catch the pole. One of the thorns stabbed her forearm.

It stabbed her too quickly to hurt. She could see the thorn lodged beneath the skin, a dark line beneath an inch-long bulge of flesh. And then Samuel was yanking her away from the Hedge while Sister Margaret withdrew the pole.

Talia watched, dazed, as Samuel took another rag from the chest and wound it gently around her arm. Sister Margaret had unscrewed the brass bowl from the pole, replacing it with a narrow metal loop. She threaded the rag through the loop, wrapping and tying it off so that none of the metal was exposed. Then she slid the rag into the Hedge and began to clean the prince.

Prince Jerome was sobbing like a child. So was Lilly. "I'm sorry," she said, over and over.

The prince started to scream. "Go away. Leave me! All of you, *leave now! At once!*"

"Of course," Sister Margaret said calmly, pulling the shit-stained rag from the pole.

As Samuel herded them back toward the church, he turned back toward Talia. "You bear the agony well. Few can endure the bite of the Hedge without screaming."

"Thank you," Talia said, still dazed. In truth, there was no pain, only a gentle throbbing in her veins.

"This is the life you've chosen. A life of blood and filth and servitude before God. Are you certain this is what you want?"

Talia shrugged and rubbed her bandaged arm. She thought of the babies in her womb. Why should she serve a God who had turned his back on Talia so long ago? At that moment, Talia's sympathy lay with the fairies who had left princes like Jerome to suffer. If only Talia bowed her head and said nothing.

Samuel took that as assent. He clasped her shoulder. "Give your strength and will to God, child. In the end, he *will* destroy this abomination."

THAT NIGHT, TALIA DREAMED SHE WAS THE PRINCESS Aurora. She stood near a narrow window, watching from her room as Prince Jerome waded through the thorns. Naked and soiled, the prince fought his way into the courtyard.

Jerome approached the castle. Suddenly Talia found herself abed, unable to move. She lay frozen as the door creaked inward. Her body was heavy as stone. Even her breathing slowed, too quiet to hear.

From the corner of her eye, she watched the door swing silently inward. Prince Jerome fastened a long blade to the end of a pole. She tried to shake her head, to beg for mercy, but her body failed. She couldn't even close her eyes.

The pole jabbed her belly. Twin infants wailed from her womb, but she couldn't move her head to see them.

The prince tossed the pole aside and wiped blood from his hands. Talia tried to get away, but thorn-covered vines grew from the mattress to pin her in place. His body blocked the light. Ever so slowly, the prince leaned closer, a faceless shadow in the darkness.

Talia lurched awake.

Moonlight gleamed through cracks in the walls and doorway. Moving as quietly as she could, Talia grabbed her sandals and crept over the sleeping bodies of the other Initiates.

Once outside, she slipped into her sandals and sucked the cold air into her lungs, trying to regain control.

"Are you all right?"

Talia jumped. She hadn't seen Lilly standing there in the shadows. "What are you doing awake?"

Lilly shrugged. "Praying for forgiveness For my mistake today For my curse and my sins And for you. Talia, the Hedge *wants* you."

Talia shivered at the conviction in Lilly's voice. "Why?"

"I don't know." Lilly looked away. "Your children, I suppose."

"The Hedge can have them, for all I care The thorns can send them back to God."

"You don't mean that." Lilly crossed herself "You shouldn't say such things here. Brother Samuel says that each sin gives new strength to the evil."

Lilly was right She didn't mean it It only made her angrier "You know nothing of evil," she snapped

She could see a pair of Sisters walking alongside the Hedge One carried a small oil lamp, the other a large, woven basket.

"Herbs for tea," Lilly explained. "To help bring sleep for the princes Many of them can only sleep for short stretches of time Night is a constant battle between pain and exhaustion." She touched Talia's cheek "You're as young as I am. Why are you so sad and bitter?"

Talia swallowed, frightened by an upsurge of emotion. "I .. I came here to find safety. Like a fool, a part of me still hoped God would look after me."

"But He will!" Lilly said excitedly. She stood, pulling Talia to her feet. "Come with me to the chapel, and we can pray together."

Talia freed her hands. "Has God helped you? Has he done away with your 'curse,' or done anything at all to protect you from the visions that haunt you?"

"He will," Lilly said again Her eyes were wide. "My faith isn't yet strong enough I watch Brother Samuel go forth each day without doubt or confusion He helps me see my own weakness But someday -"

"Someday, what? Brother Samuel will discover your visions and cast you out?"

Lilly stiffened. "If that is God's will."

Talia gave up. "Very well. I'll join you as soon as I've dressed in something more modest."

But as she left, she found herself turning away from the church and walking instead toward the Accursed Hedge.

TALIA WALKED FOR A LONG TIME, KEEPING HER DISTANCE from the Hedge so she wouldn't be bothered by the men and women working through the night Eventually, she reached Prince Jerome Glancing around to make sure it was safe, she moved closer She wasn't sure how she could tell this bit of Hedge from any other, especially in the moonlight The platforms for the princes were identical Somehow she simply knew, just as she knew she would find traces of dried blood on that thorn in front of her, from when she had injured herself

Jerome was a dark shadow. Darkness hid his face, but his chest moved slowly, and he didn't react to her presence. Asleep, then

Talia went closer and rested her hands on a fat, gnarled vine Flakes of purple skin fell away beneath her hands

The vine was warmer than she would have guessed It felt alive Was this the feel of fairy magic? No doubt Samuel would say it was fueled by the fires of Hell

Jerome gasped and shifted his head Talia heard his whistling hiss of pain, but he didn't seem to awaken

In sleep, he was nothing more than a man No different from Brother Samuel or any other Only days ago, Talia had thought to spend her life in service to men such as this. The idea of joining a convent had come to her the first night away from home, as she lay shivering and hidden in a chicken coop A convent would bring safety and security Better yet, her family would never expect it of her

Her mother would have laughed at the thought of Talia willingly serving any man or woman But then, Talia's mother had been dead five years

Talia banished those thoughts before they could lead any further Instead, she concentrated on Jerome She watched him for a long time.

Why this convent? Why the Church of the Iron cross? It wasn't until now, after seeing the princes, that she began to understand her own motives

Perhaps she had come to see the kinglings suffer

BROTHER SAMUEL CAME TO HER THE NEXT MORNING, AS SHE and the other Initiates watched Sister Petitia tend Prince Aaron Talia saw Samuel arrive, but he said nothing Nor could he speak, until Sister Petitia finished shaving the prince

Nearly fifty years old, Prince Aaron had spent half his life trapped in the Hedge. He never spoke, and barely moved at all, except to eat and drink whatever was placed in front of him It had been two years since his hair was last cut. In that time, it had grown long enough to snarl and knot around the thorns.

Sister Petitia delicately slid the pole back and forth, sawing the razor sharp blade through a lock of beard caught on a thorn She was one of the few servants trusted to wield a blade this close to a prince, and she had made it clear that *nobody* was to make a sound until the blade was fully removed from the Hedge Anyone who distracted her could be banished, no matter what the excuse.

Inside the Hedge, sparrows chirped and fluttered about, collecting fallen locks for their nests Prince Aaron might as well have been a statue for all the notice they took of him

Eventually, Sister Petitia finished Before she could speak, Samuel grabbed Talia's shoulder "You were out last night. You went to see the princes."

Talia shot a quick glare at Lilly Had she told Samuel? "I went for a walk. To clear my head I have trouble sleeping."

"You went to Prince Jerome. He saw you, but wouldn't say what you did."

So Lilly hadn't betrayed her after all. Several of the girls giggled. A furious look from Samuel silenced them. She knew what they must be thinking, though.

"I did nothing about your prince's .. *desires*, if that's what you're asking I thought he was asleep."

Sister Petitia cleared her throat "Initiates aren't allowed to wander the Hedge alone, dear."

"You could be banished," Samuel added

"On the other hand," Sister Petitia went on, "I recall a young boy who snuck out every night to talk to his dying prince, even before he took the Oath."

Samuel's cheeks turned red He looked like he wanted to shout at the elderly Sister, but didn't dare. From the way his neck muscles were moving, it was a close thing. Finally, he scowled and said, "Very well As punishment, you'll remain here to scrub and repair the platform."

"Thank you." There was true gratitude in Talia's words, and she hated it. So what if that trumped-up clod threatened to send her away. She could always go elsewhere

But the mere thought of leaving left her throat dry and her hands damp. After only two days, the very idea made her ill. Her arm throbbed, and she glanced at the Hedge

Lilly said the Hedge wanted Talia and her unborn children. For the first time, Talia started to take that warning seriously

THAT NIGHT, TALIA WOKE SUDDENLY. SHE KEPT PERFECTLY still until she identified the sound that had awakened her There the scrape of a bare foot against the floor. She turned. It was too dark to make out the girl's features, but Lilly's careful, hesitant movements were unmistakable

"I couldn't sleep," Lilly said "I dreamed of your children, beautiful as the sun and the moon. I saw them taken from you, Talia. Broken and left to die." Her voice broke "The Accursed Hedge is fairy magic. Fairies have always taken human children You're in danger!"

"Is it?" Talia whispered. "Fairy magic, I mean According to the stories, the twelfth fairy laid her curse upon the princess. The thirteenth used her magic to combat the curse and save the princess's life But none of the songs say who created the Hedge."

"Of course it's magic. It's obviously not natural."

"Have you ever met a fairy? Has anyone ever tried to find them, to ask their aid in destroying the Hedge?"

Lilly shook her head. "That's blasphemy, Talia!"

"Perhaps it is. Or perhaps it's common sense!" But why would the fairies create the Hedge in the first place? Why would they then abandon their creation? She sighed. "Even in the wildest tales, I've never heard of a fairy changeling swapped while the babe was still in the womb. I should be safe for a while. Safe from the Hedge, at least."

"I guess." Lilly touched Talia's arm. "But what will you do when the babies come?"

"It doesn't matter." For some reason, she found it easier to talk in the darkness. "My father will find me. He has woodsmen who can track a gnat's flight at midnight. He'll bribe or torture every villager for miles if he has to."

"How? Surely he can't—"

"He can." Talia had known all along, really. Tonight was simply the first time she had allowed herself to recognize the truth. She would never be free. "Kings can do anything they wish. Just ask your precious Brother Samuel."

She heard Lilly suck in her breath. "You're a princess? Talia, you have to go now! The curse was laid upon a princess. You're twice endangered."

Talia shook her head. "It doesn't matter. I'm no more likely to escape my father than Prince Aaron is to break free from the thorns. If he can't find me by conventional means, he'll hire witches and sorcerers. He would even deal with the fairy folk if he had to."

"Any father would want his daughter back. And when he discovers his grandchildren, he'll—"

"He'll destroy them." Talia closed her eyes. "They're in greater danger from him than from the Hedge. He will come for me, like a hunter chasing a prize stag. He'll never stop looking, especially once he learns of my children."

"I don't understand."

Perhaps it was the darkness that loosened Talia's throat. "He can't afford to let me go. Not with twin boys to prove what he did to me."

Lilly gasped and crossed herself. "You mustn't speak of such things."

"It's the truth. If you can't hear it, go away and let me lie in peace."

The mattress shifted as Lilly stood. "I'll pray for you, Princess Talia. Maybe God will show you a way out."

Talia snorted loudly, then winced. But she heard nothing from the other girls. Hopefully they still slept. "God has never taken much interest in protecting me," she said.

"So you turn your back on Him?"

"He turned his back on me. Just like he turned his back on Aurora. Who is the more heartless?" Talia rolled over on her side, away from Lilly. A few minutes later, she heard Lilly slip away, leaving her alone.

THE INITIATES WATCHED AS LILLY SERVED PRINCE HUMPHREY a pompous, angry blook of a man who cursed and swore at everyone who passed.

Lilly and Talia hadn't spoken since the other night. Talia wasn't surprised. Lilly had probably decided Talia was damned and was trying to distance herself as much as possible. Whether for the children in her womb or because she had "turned her back on God," Talia wasn't sure. Probably both.

"Look at that bird," said one of the younger initiates, a skinny thing with a high-pitched squeal of a voice. "It's beautiful."

Talia didn't look. She was busy watching Lilly struggle with Prince Humphrey. The prince had seized the end of the pole with his good left hand and refused to release it. Lilly looked close to tears, but she kept trying to gently pull it back.

"Damn you, woman!" shouted the prince. "Feeding me this miserable slop." He yanked the pole, nearly breaking it out of Lilly's grip. Oatmeal sloshed over his arm. "Miserable bastards can't even make a palatable meal. Get this ugly bitch from my sight!"

"I'm sorry, m'lord," Lilly said. She had given up trying to retrieve the pole and was now simply holding the end so Prince Humphrey wouldn't pull the whole thing into the Hedge.

"Flush anger and despair from your heart," Samuel whispered to Lilly, too low for the prince to hear. "Prince Humphrey has spent years in agony. Forgive his harsh words, and pity him his fate."

Lilly nodded and held on, but Prince Humphrey only yanked harder.

Then she took a deep breath and turned around, readying herself for the tongue-lashing Brother Samuel was sure to give.

"It looks like a hawk," said another girl. "It's flying toward us!"

If Talia hadn't been distracted, she might have been able to intercept the bird. She might have had a chance.

Instead, she stepped closer to Lilly and took the pole from her hands. Brother Samuel started to protest, then seemed to change his mind.

"I'm sorry, m'lord," Talia called. She gave the pole a sharp twist. Lilly didn't understand how much you desired to keep the bowl for yourself." A few more turns, and the end of the pole came unscrewed from the bowl. Talia pulled the pole back before the prince could grab it.

"Stupid wench!" The prince had dropped the bowl, and oatmeal covered his hip and leg. "Look what you've done!"

"My humblest apologies, m'lord," she said. She shoved the pole into Lilly's hands. "I suggest you use the hook to retrieve the bowl. You'll need a rag to clean him up as well. Or perhaps you expect God to take care of it?"

Then she took a deep breath and turned around, readying herself for the tongue-lashing Brother Samuel was sure to give.

Brother Samuel was paying no attention. A large blue and red bird perched on the edge of the Hedge. Samuel raised one arm. The bird, well-trained, flew to Samuel and waited, wings spread, while Samuel untied the message tube from its leg.

Talia stopped breathing.

"What kind of bird is that?" Lilly asked.

"A western blue-tailed hawk. An exotic messenger bird from across the ocean," Talia said. She glanced around, wanting to run, but it was too late. Samuel was already staring at her.

Talia looked down and added, "My father collects them."

THE TRUTH ABOUT TALIA'S IDENTITY BROUGHT AT LEAST ONE blessing. As a princess, she no longer had to obey Brother Samuel. The lines of his face tightened each time she gave him an order, but he never complained. He would do anything she asked, except allow her to leave.

"Remind me when my father's men are due to arrive," she said.

"Two days, according to his note."

They stood at the back of the church, watching as Lilly took the Oath of Servitude. The Brothers and Sisters of the church filled the front rows. Townsfolk crowded around the edges and near the doors.

The priest was a small man whose wild red hair made him look younger than the Initiates. He raised his voice, surprisingly deep for one so skinny. "Children of God, we come to recognize our sister Lilly as she dedicates herself to a life of servitude."

Lilly had spent last night in solitude, sleeping in the open. For her bed, she had nothing but the thorns on the earth. For warmth and comfort, she had only a thin robe and an iron-banded cross, the same cross she now clutched in her hands.

Talia glanced at the healing scar on her forearm. "Samuel, why do you make Initiates sleep among the thorns?"

The priest was a small man whose wild red hair made him look younger than the Initiates. He raised his voice, surprisingly deep for one so skinny.

"So they may understand the agony of the princes trapped by the fairy curse. I spend one night a week in the thorns, so I do not forget." There was no boastfulness in his words.

Talia nodded. "But the fairy didn't curse the princes. She cursed Princess Aurora." At least, that was what the stories said.

The priest motioned for Lilly to kneel. "Do you promise to serve in sickness and health, forsaking all earthly bonds? Letting neither pain nor desire sway you from the light of God?"

"I do," Lilly said loudly.

Talia stared at the mosaic on the floor, the young man leading the princess from the thorns. "Do you believe God will overcome the curse?"

"I have no doubt," said Samuel.

"Then why has it taken so many years? Why have so many princes lost their lives?"

There was no answer.

"Why is your God so weak?"

"God is all the princes ... and myself ... have left." Samuel walked out of the church. Talia knew he would be waiting just beyond the doors, to make sure she didn't try to escape.

"We believe in one God, triumphant and almighty," the priest said. "We believe in salvation, and the fall of evil."

"Amen," whispered Talia.

TALIA GRIPPED LILLY'S ARMS AND WHISPERED, "I NEED YOU to look into the Hedge."

Lilly blanked. "You can see as well as I—"

"No," Talia said. "I need you to *look*."

Lilly paled. It had taken Talia the entire day to make an opportunity to speak with Lilly. She was Sister Lilly now, but even Sisters rarely attended the princes alone. To make matters worse, Samuel still shadowed Talia like a hound. It hadn't been until evening, when a wagon arrived from town, that Talia found her chance.

Lilly was helping to prepare bread for the princes' evening meal, tearing away the hard crusts for those who no longer had their teeth. Talia had sat down to join her, muttering, "If I'm forced to remain, at least allow me to feel useful." Grudgingly, Samuel had agreed. He now stood with the other Brothers, helping to unload sacks of flour and wheat while keeping an eye on Talia.

"Why would you ask me to do that?" Lilly said quietly. "I've sworn my life to God."

"Because I need your help," Talia said. "Because if you don't, my children will be executed by their own father." She waited to see how Lilly would respond, if she would flee like last time.

"Would he really ..." Lilly bit her lip. "They're innocent. How could anyone—"

"Innocence doesn't matter." Talia pointed to the Hedge. The sun was setting, and the thorns shone in the orange light. "They're as innocent as the princess was when she was cursed to death."

Lilly swallowed. Her fingers slipped as she tried to crack another loaf of bread. "What do you hope to see?"

"I want to understand. The stories ... they make no sense. I want to know the truth about the Accursed Hedge."

"What truth? The Hedge is wicked!" Several people glanced their way, including Samuel.

"Don't make me beg," Talia whispered.

Lilly stared at the bread for a long time. "No, I wouldn't do that."

"Then help me. Please."

Lilly nodded. "I ... I had a dream last night. I didn't want to speak of it."

"Was it a vision?" Talia pressed.

"I don't know. I saw the Hedge. It had grown into an enormous mockery of a cathedral, enveloping everything. The church, the town, everything was gone." Her eyes shone as she stared at Talia. "It came for *you*. I told you the Hedge wanted you, Talia. I mean, Princess."

Talia clenched Lilly's hands so tightly her fingers whitened. It made no sense! The Hedge ... the church ... there was something more. Something important. Why couldn't she figure it out? "Lilly, I need you to do something else for me."

"I can't help you escape, Princess," Lilly said.

Talia ignored her. "I need you to meet me before morning mass. I want you to come with me to the Hedge, one last time before my father arrives. I'm not allowed to wander alone, but if I have to be guarded, I want my guard to be a friend. Also—" She lowered her gaze. Pride warred with desperation. Desperation won. "Also, I want you to pray for me."

SEVERAL MORE HAWKS ARRIVED THE FOLLOWING MORNING, announcing the pending arrival of Talia's father. Most of the Brothers woke early to patrol the Accursed Hedge. Those who circled the Hedge itself carried long spears. Others went into town to guard the roads. Another group shouldered short, powerful bows and

disappeared into the woods. Lilly said this was how the Brothers reacted to any visiting noble.

"It's their job to keep the princes safe," Lilly said. "While they're here, they're sacrosanct. No kingdom would violate the safety of the Hedge. But there are always individuals, assassins, and others who might try. The Brothers protect the princes with their lives."

Morning dew glittered on the thorns along the ground, and the Hedge shone like dark metal.

"What are you going to do, Princess?"

Talia kept walking. "In your vision, you said the Hedge became a cathedral and overwhelmed the land."

"That's right," Lilly said quietly.

"How could fairy magic overcome the might of God?"

"I don't know." She was walking quickly to keep up. "Talia, please stop."

Talia halted.

"I can't let you run away. I know you don't want to go back, but—"

"I said I wanted a friend, Lilly." Talia turned. Her eyes searched Lilly's round face, trying to read the thoughts behind her eyes. "Did you pray for me, like I asked? Did God tell you to betray me?"

Footsteps crunched behind her. Talia guessed who it would be. "Good morning, Brother Samuel."

"Lilly told me about the children within your womb," Samuel said. He planted the butt of his spear amid the vines. "Infants are forbidden here. They endanger us all. I don't know why you abandoned your husband, but—"

"*Not* my husband."

"You were married in the eyes of God," Samuel said firmly. "Your sin brings evil to this place. Your presence strengthens the fairy magic and delays God's triumph."

Talia took a step toward Lilly, who backed away, eyes wide. "What happened to Aurora's family?"

Lilly blinked. "They were cast into sleep with the princess."

"Why? The fairy curse was laid upon Aurora alone."

"She was the most precious thing in their world," Samuel said. "I'm certain they would have chosen to join her in her curse. It was the noble thing."

"Noble?" Talia shot him a look so scathing he actually took a step back. "Her family invited fairies to her birth. They bribed those fairies to give her beauty, to transform her into a prize doll to be won at a summer festival.

"*Nobility* treats Aurora as a treasure to be won. You think Prince Jerome came to rescue a sleeping maiden? Or is he simply a man who *preferred* his women unconscious. And what of your own prince, Brother Samuel? Did he truly quest to rescue the princess? Was it selfless love that drove him into the thorns? Or did he, like the rest, come in pursuit of his own glory?"

Samuel drew back a fist, then caught himself. "You know nothing of my prince."

"I know royalty," she snapped. "I know how kings use sleeping maidens, and I know what your princes would do to Aurora."

"You *must* go." His face was dark. "For years, the fairies have avoided this place, driven back by the might of God. By bringing your children here, you call to them. You'll bring them down upon us all."

Talia hesitated. There was no denying the way the Hedge longed for her. In her dreams... the way it had reacted to her touch... "I won't go back."

"You must." Samuel moved forward, so they formed a triangle. No matter which way Talia ran, Lilly or Samuel would be able to intercept her. She took a step back, and they followed.

"You knew I planned to run?"

"You deceived us from the day you arrived," Samuel said. "I can't believe you would change your ways now."

Talia shook her head. "What would God say to that, I wonder? Wasn't it God who sent his own son to teach forgiveness?"

"You've not asked for forgiveness, nor have you repented your sins," Samuel countered. He took another step, backing Talia closer toward the Hedge and blocking her escape with his spear. "Believe it or not, Princess, I've prayed for you. I've prayed for an end to your unhappiness. It's not my place to judge you. That is for God."

"You're right," she said slowly. "Tell me, Samuel, are you *certain* the Hedge is cursed? Are you *certain* that curse was placed by fairies, and not by another?"

Before he could answer, she spun and ducked between the thorns, into the Accursed Hedge.

Lilly screamed.

"Princess, no!" Samuel dropped his spear and lunged for her, heedless of the bloody cuts he received in the process. His fingers caught the sleeve of her gown. Thorns scratched her skin as she struggled. She forced her arm toward a vine so the thorns pierced the sleeve. There was a tearing sound, and Samuel stumbled back, a ragged scrap of cloth in his fingers.

Talia stepped deeper. Thorns tangled her hair. One pricked the back of her leg. She had to step over an enormous vine, then duck and pull her hair with both hands to rip it free.

"Lilly, get the pole and the hook! Quickly!" Talia glanced back. By now, she was nearly ten feet into the Hedge. She could see Samuel clutching his arm. Blood trickled through his fingers.

Lilly was crying. "Talia, you've seen what the Hedge will do to you. I know what you've endured, but you have to put your faith in God to save you."

"I think that's what I'm doing," Talia said.

"Lilly, go!" Samuel shouted. "Others have made such progress into the thicket. Each one came to regret his decision to forge onward. Or have you struck a deal with Satan, that he will protect you from his foul magic? If so, you have my pity, for you'll be damned beyond redemption."

Talia straightened as much as she could. So long as she kept her shoulders hunched and her head tilted to the left, she could rest without the thorns touching her skin. "The songs say the Princess Aurora was the most beautiful maiden in the world," she said.

"Your point, m'lady?" Samuel asked. He glanced at Lilly. "Retrieve the pole, Sister!"

"My point?" Talia asked. She rested her fingers on a thorn. "What greater curse could the fairies have given than such perfect beauty? Perhaps there is one who will look upon her as a person rather than a prize, but if so, that one hasn't yet come."

Talia clutched the small Imitate's cross at her neck. "And until then, God will protect her, just as He will protect me and my children."

"You blasphemous—" Lilly caught Samuel by the arm. "Brother, what if she's right? What if this is God's way of sheltering her?"

Samuel jerked free and hurried away, no doubt going for the pole.

"Thank you," Talia said to Lilly. She wanted to reach out and squeeze Lilly's hand, but she had already waded too deep into the Hedge. She turned and squeezed sideways, dropping to her knees to crawl through a gap. The thorns continued to scratch her skin, but none of the vines closed around her. She glanced back. "Lilly, if the Hedge is a gift from God, couldn't the same be true of your own gift?"

Lilly suffened, but nodded grudgingly.

Something tickled Talia's cheek. A single red bloom, barely open. She could hear Samuel thrusting the pole into the Hedge, but when she looked back, she relaxed. The hook had caught in a thick knot of vines—a knot that hadn't been there before.

She wondered if anyone would believe the tale Samuel and Lilly told. More likely, Talia's father would assume she had fled, and somehow bribed or bewitched them into telling such an outlandish tale.

It was darker up ahead. The orange light grew heavy, like the sunset. Her body felt warm and numb.

How long would the "curse" last? Years? Centuries?

She fought a yawn. It didn't matter. She, like the Princess Aurora, would be safe.

Talia barely noticed when the ground softened beneath her feet, or when her face fell to rest on gentle green moss instead of sharp thorns. ❧

A Better Place

WHEN PARADISE BECKONS IT TAKES A STRONG MAN TO TURN HIS BACK. BUT IS ANYONE STRONG ENOUGH TO WONDER "WHAT IF?"

By Josh Roundtree

Illustration by Janet Hamlin

Clayton never forgot the day his brother crossed the cotton field and left the farm for good. Russ had always been given to wanderlust, and when the sandman said he could take him to a better place, the boy didn't give his old life another thought. Now, as Clayton sat on the front porch in his dusty, green coveralls, watching an approaching sandstorm turn the wide western sky a dismal, smoky brown, he wondered what would have happened if he'd gone to the better place too.

Rigs thundered by on the highway, loaded with gasoline, frozen chicken, and foreign cars. Gone were the graying Ford trucks that carried laughing farm hands to their day's labor, only to return in the afternoon pulling trailers loaded with bails of hay, the men tired and yearning for supper. Everything was bigger now.

His back hurt, like it always did, as he half-heartedly smoked his cigarette. He hated the things, but he was set in his ways. *That's just a polite way of saying weak willed,* he thought before taking another drag. Russ would have been able to quit. That boy did whatever he pleased and there was no way he'd be willing to let anything control him. That's what had given him the strength to take chances, and Clayton often imagined his brother, living in a dream world, reaping the bountiful harvest of his decision.

Clayton tipped his sweat-stained straw hat a bit lower to block the sun as he stared out across the endless rows of cotton. A lone green tractor, choking out foul emissions, crept toward him. His only son, Harold, sat behind the steering wheel, a look of intense concentration on his face. Keeping a tractor running in a perfectly straight line was not an easy skill to master, and one he decided Harold never would.

Harold was ill suited to farming, always bitter about his lot in life and sure he was meant for better things. In many ways, Clayton understood and agreed with him, but he was from an age when you accepted the life you were given and if that wasn't good enough for you, you lived with it. Clayton wished he could tell his son he was sorry. This was life and there was no getting around it, no easy solution. But, of course, that would be a lie. Russ had found a way.

Not far from the rumbling tractor, Clayton's grandson hacked away at random weeds with a hoe. Young and energetic, head bopping beneath tiny headphones, he was shirtless in spite of the blazing sun. Watching John work always made Clayton smile. The boy couldn't be more unlike his father although not yet twenty years old, he'd achieved a peace in life that neither his father nor grandfather had ever felt. Farming was what he aspired to and he was too young to think he would ever need anything else.

The sandstorm moved fast. The whirling, raging wall of dirt reached the end of the west field, and the tiny green tractor was no longer visible. The smell of loose earth rode the wind and tickled his nose, causing him to sneeze. He wiped his nose with a worn handkerchief and shoved it back into his pocket. Soon he'd be able to feel the dirt like grit between his teeth and his watery eyes would turn a brilliant red. Such was life in West Texas.

Blown loose from miles and miles of farmland, the incoming sand moved as a single entity. Clayton never failed to be amazed when he witnessed such storms, creeping ever closer, seeming to devour the land and its inhabitants. Watching his fields disappear always reminded him of Russ and the day he'd chosen to leave with the storm.

Russ had been much like Harold. The boy had a longing for the city that couldn't be satisfied by the occasional trip up to Lubbock, and he'd often sit on the back porch, staring west and telling Clayton how he'd leave some day. Maybe move to Dallas or New York, or maybe to Los Angeles so he could be in the movies.

"Anywhere's better than here," he said that day. His white shirt had been clean and tight with starch that morning, but was now wrinkled and dirt stained, tail hanging lazily over the back of his pants. He sipped a bottle of root beer their mother had let them buy on the way home from church and he handed it to his brother.

"Here ain't so bad," said Clayton. He took a deep swallow and felt the gas bubble instantly begin to form in his stomach.

"Farming ain't for me," said Russ. "I want to live where the dirt ain't always blowing and they let you sleep past four. You know what I heard?"

"What?"

"I heard them movie stars sleep 'till ten o'clock. And why not? They don't got chickens and pigs to feed, or cotton to pick or nothing."

"Ten o'clock? Why would you want to sleep that long?"

"Because you can. Nobody's your boss."

Clayton had become used to his younger brother's flights of fancy over the years and he worked hard to keep the boy grounded. "Sandstorm coming," he said, not bothering to point over the west field. They always came from the west.

"Course it is," said Russ, scowling. "Can't have a day without sand, can we?"

"Suppose not," said Clayton dryly, handing the bottle of root beer back to Russ.

Neither of them spoke for several minutes, content to watch the quietly approaching sandstorm. The wind that carried it spun the blades of the windmill in an endless circle, producing a lonely squeal. Two spotted cows lapped water from opposite sides of a rusted trough. By the time the brothers had finished their root beer, the wall of sand had hidden the cows from sight.

"Look there," said Russ, nodding his head toward the hazy brown horizon. "Where'd he come from?"

Clayton held his hand over his eyes and saw a tall, well-dressed man approaching. He wore a suit of pale brown fabric that flapped merrily in the stiff wind. He moved toward them with an easy grace, leather shoes reflecting the sun's brilliant light despite his path through the tilled earth.

"Looks like he's coming from church," said Clayton, but he knew that wasn't the case before he finished speaking. He'd never seen anybody sitting in their chapel's polished pews with clothes so fine. He studied his own Sunday clothes, littered with patched holes and stains so old he'd forgotten how they got there.

"Church is the other way," said Russ. He rose to his feet to get a better look. "Ask me, he's coming to sell something. Nobody but salesmen dress like that, except maybe movie stars. You figure he might be a movie star?"

"If he was, what would he be doing here? You see any movies made here lately?"

"No, but he might be," said Russ, defensively. "I didn't say he was for sure. Probably just a salesman."

"Probably."

A group of thin chickens with filthy white feathers searched the ground for seeds. When the man passed them, they raced off with a chorus of irate clucks. He was nearing the front of the house, so the brothers decided to stand and greet him.

"We already got a Bible," said Russ, nudging Clayton with his elbow. "So if you're selling Bibles, we ain't buying."

"Young man, I'm not here to sell anything. Everything I have to offer is free of charge." Now that he was close enough to really study, Clayton noticed his teeth were as shiny and well kept as the rest of him. His blue eyes were deep and friendly, and he couldn't resist shaking the man's hand when it was offered. Russ stared up at the man, eyes narrowed, the top of his head even with the man's shoulders.

"We already got religion too," said Russ. "That's the only thing I ever seen anyone give away for free."

Clayton noticed a gold watch chain dangling from the stranger's vest pocket, a sure sign he wasn't a preacher. He'd never known a preacher that could afford a gold chain.

"Religion is wonderful, but that's not why I'm here either."

"Well, Daddy and Mama are in town still. So you'll have to come back." Russ shoved his hands in his pockets, signaling the matter closed.

"I didn't come to see them. I came to see you."

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LOVE CAN TAKE MANY SHAPES AND

SCHWARZE

FORMS AND LEAD LOVERS TO MANY

MADONNA

WORDS AND DEEDS. SOME MAY ULTI

AND THE

MATELY BE SELF DESTRUCTIVE, BUT

SANDALWOOD

IN THE END ONLY TIME WILL TELL

KNIGHT

BY RUTH NESTVOLD AND JAY LAKE

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL KOMARCK

Schwarze Madonna

The Black Madonna belonged to the Order of the Red Knights fighting for the Armies of the Moon. No one knew her real n ame or where she came from, but all knew of her, all recognized the colors she had chosen for herself, red fading into black, her crimson surcoat of velvet so dark, the shades flowed into each other and could hardly be distinguished. All had a name for her in their own tongue. *Schwarze Madonna, Madonna Nera, Madone Noire*

And all barred their doors and latched their shutters when she was sighted

It was rumored that the color of her hair mirrored the color of her velvet surcoat, black fading into red, but few ever got close enough to confirm the tales. Fewer still lived to tell of them.

Especially if they were men.

For while the Black Madonna belonged to the Order of the Red Knights, it was for herself she fought. Her own crusade she pursued, bitter and violent, against men of all armies and all colors, seeking vengeance for some crime no one knew and none asked about.

It had not always been so.

Once she had fought side by side with the Rose Knights of the Armies of the Moon, had made a name for herself through her bravery and fairness, had been sought by all to guard their backs in battle. Then one night she had ridden away from those to whom she owed allegiance and begun her terrible rampage. Soon women had their men away in cellars and barns when she was rumored to be near.

There came a day when one young farmer who had no womenfolk to protect him was working in the field, pulling up radishes and carrots for his dinner and singing a song of sun and harvest that lifted above the trees at the edge of his property. The Black Madonna was passing through the forest when she heard the song. She pulled her dark warhorse around to seek the merry music, the sound of simple happiness, strange and compulsive. It tugged at her heart in places she had locked away and forgotten.

She stopped at the edge of the forest and watched the young man, listening to his fine tenor, pulling off her helmet and shaking out her striking hair of black and red. He stood, still singing, radishes in one hand and carrots in the other, and turned to see her. His voice stilled and he stared.

"Please, continue singing," she said.

"What should I sing, my lady?"

"Oh, anything."

She saw his gaze wander from her strange, particolored hair to her velvet surcoat of shifting crimson and black, but instead of fear, a question entered his eyes, and he began to sing of misunderstanding and betrayal. She felt the tears begin to course down her cheeks, healing something in her that was broken.

The Black Madonna was so enthralled that she failed to hear the pounding hooves behind her, didn't feel the slashing sword as it met the back of her neck, taking her head off with one blow. If she saw the farmer's eyes widen and heard his song break off in a scream, it was too late.

"Lucky for you I came when I did, lad." The knight, who also wore red, dismounted and retrieved the head from the field, grabbing it by what was left of the particolored hair. His voice was colored with a strange, outlander accent. "She eats young men for supper, that one."

"Ate," the farmer corrected, automatically and stupidly, tears streaming down his face.

The red knight laughed, tying his grisly trophy to the strap of his saddlebags and taking the reins of her now-riderless warhorse. "Dispose of the body for me, would you, lad?" He nudged what was left of the Black Madonna with one booted foot, still chuckling. "Who would have thought she'd be felled by a song?"

The young man buried her beneath the cherry tree, singing to her of autumn days and harvest. But not of betrayal.

Almost every night he sings to the Black Madonna, when sunset bleeds red into the sky and the birds join him in song, a braid of particolored hair circling his left wrist.

Someday he will return her head to her.

The Sandalwood Knight

The farmer knelt before the cherry tree at the top of his best field. He held a shovel, rusted point pressed into the honest soil, splintered, silver-worn handle clasped between praying hands. A cracked and faded braid, frayed almost to nothing, slid down his left arm. A lammergeyer circled high overhead, a distant hyphen punctuating the secret language of the sky. Gentle hills receded in the distance, scattered with groves and old fields gone to long, fallow grass and the cycling hum of insects. Around him small things stirred, hedgehogs and mice, the furtive thieves of his ceaseless labors. Something had burned recently, and though clear, the air hung heavy with the stench of it.

In this moment, he did not care for fire or vermin.

"You who sleep here," he began, then his voice broke. Words, ordinarily easy for him, clawed in his chest like badgers. "You ..."

Though he sang or spoke to the grave every day, this was different. He had filled her ever-stilled ears with tales of children and animals, broken hearts and soaring angels, all the quirks of soul and spirit and simple, struggling life. Though love her he did, never had the farmer declared his feelings, for he had only known her for moments, and had not even heard her real name.

This day he would not sing or speak quiet words of rhyme.

Instead he broke the ground over the grave, the tight-clasped shovel violating her last rest. Each blade of soil pained him. Each toss of dirt made him weep. She had nowhere else to go, except back to the soil, the Black Madonna who was buried here.

The wind shifted as he dug. A heavy pall of smoke from his burning stead settled over the farmer and his work. His time here was done, ended for him by a roving band of the Moon's conscripts, hungry for food and blankets and too crazed to just ask for help.

There was a sword buried in this grave, her sword. If he could not stay and keep her company, he would go into the world to find the Red Knight who took her life, and her head for a trophy, and in his vengeance make her whole.

He would use her man-killing blade for the task.

The Armies of the Moon had made entire countries over into eldritch paths of dream. Even in daylight, there were cobwebs that could kill, maleficent fey with their manhide bows, strange beasts that might once have been cats or ducks. By night, wild hunts howled over hedge and river bottom while misshapen shadows blocked the starlight.

So the farmer went there, first, into the countries of the Moon, seeking the Red Knight. Casting aside his slow and patient past, the farmer styled himself Robert the Brown for the soil that had been his love and work. But any man of the land also knows tools and implements and the sharp edges of scythe and knife. As he walked, Robert the Brown worked with the sword he had plucked from the Black Madonna's grave like some strange root. It was a new fruit, violence grown beneath the earth, nurtured on blood and pain and quiet, loving whispers.

He did not much care to think on the state of her headless body, still in her proud armor, fresh as the day she died. Even the worms had refused her.

That idea made Robert miss a step, staggering to the verge of the road in recovery. Could anyone be so unloved that the world would not take them back?

He would ask the Red Knight before he killed him.

So Robert the Brown walked on through a billowing forest of rotted silk and sheets of flesh. Tattoos writhed on the hanging skin, maps promising wealth and the favor of the gods. He ignored them, swinging the sword, working its balance, chopping from one side to the other, minding edge and point.

In its way it was much like a scythe, he realized A tool for harvesting

The blade was almost dull from its time in the soil, though it was a fine steel from one of the great slave armories in the distant south The scabbard he'd left within the grave—its red and black leather had been half-rotted, unlike her body, and that seemed too much of her. Lacking armor for his body, he saw no need to put the sword away Walking with its weight could only strengthen him

As he walked, metal cutting a strong aured song, ghosts emerged from the skin and silk to follow him. They were thin in the manner of ghosts, so that when he glanced across his shoulder they all turned sideways, no more visible than hanging spidersilk. But when he looked down the road, Robert could hear their voices behind him.

They accused They whined. They chaffered of injustice and the rightness of the world and why he should be free and warm to walk in the lands of the Moon

farmer upright across his fields ..."
breathing sweet air ..."
why my precious William, William the . "
owe us, owe us all "
unfair
hurts the honest dead "

It was like being followed by vengeful pensioners, bent on violence with their canes and pots of physic

But when he turned, they were not there

Robert the Brown had been a farmer, but farmers are not stupid men. The best among them can read the coming snow in the paths of the darting swifts, follow a lost calf across miles of rain, and trade with fat city men for best value on bushels of grain set to turn from the damp They can kill a wolf with a pruning blade, dress a deer for winter meat, and hammer out a new rimstrap for a wagon wheel

Ghosts did not scare him. nor even confuse him overmuch

"I should thunk upon fairness if I were you," Robert announced to the flapping trees with their burdens of skin and silk

The whispering stopped with the silence of an anvil stone on a rest day

Without breaking stride, he cut a fancy figure with the sword, drawing the shape of a doubled radish from his old garden. "The dead have their own business," Robert continued, "in which the living have no part Should the dead therefore take a place in my business in turn?"

Slowly the whispering started up again. Complaints, mixed with threats now. The sideways ghosts were slipping to his left and right, less careful with their profiles, so that he could almost see them.

Again without a missed step, Robert turned as he might angle the plow at the end of a furrow and slashed sideways with the sword that had lain in a dead woman's grip these past four years That long in the country of spirits had given the blade power, as he knew it must, and the cobweb ghosts parted with a snap like steel braces, shrieking as they left this world.

Those ghosts outside the swing of his weapon scattered as fast as wind and malice could carry them

Smiling Robert the Brown cut a new set of figures with the blade and kept walking Sooner or later he would find a soldier A soldier would lead him to a knight A knight would lead him to the Rose Knights The Rose Knights would lead him to the Red Knight The Red Knight would lead him home again, to restore his beloved to her rest

Three days later Robert the Brown walked out of the Moonwood

A trail of shattered trees and riven ghosts marked his passage, and even the Moonwood itself had begun to fear his imperturbable power As a result, whining spirits clung to his heels. Even some of the weaker fey had begun to follow him. He paid them no mind, this threadbare, overweak, rebellious entourage.

Botolph's Town lay before him, a village of merchants and farming factors with the last docks up the Silverbow River The settlement had been prosperous once, before the wars, but now survived sullen on the wages of soldiers and what little could still be wrestled from lands uncertain under the Moon's spell A pall of smoke hung over the town. The burning was perhaps a day old

Attack, riot, or just men on leave.

In any event, he would find his soldier here.

Trailed by his gibbering attendants, Robert the Brown strode over a footbridge and into the town, following the smoke toward the central square

Someone had been burned there, he saw, bound to thick posts and set alight Charred bones strung with strings of flesh still hung against the cracked timber, surrounded by the ash of a straw and charcoal fire Skin-stretched dogs slunk about, rooting for flesh among the ashes. while the business of the town—such as it was—went on around the market

"Who was set afire?" he asked the first person he came upon

She was some kitchen slattern, greased and bruised, hurrying on an errand. "Sure I don't know, sir," she said, without ever meeting his eye

The dogs broke off their search for food and began to circle him, whining at his now-unvisible trail of minor dead and small fey

A man dressed as a merchant, or perhaps even the mayor if the draggled chain around his neck signified anything, approached Robert The newcomer had once been pudgy, though his skin now hung loose like a starving hound's, with sad eyes the color of frozen wells and a fresh wound searning his left cheek. "Please, sir... sir He gave up trying to sort Robert's station in life, but continued to watch the sword carefully "Do not bother the people. Questions are dangerous "

It was clear that the blade gave Robert the Brown the right to continue speaking, but he had no wish to heap more trouble upon these poor folk. "I have taken up the blade," he said quietly, "in order to right that which has gone wrong. If you have wrongs to share with me. I will carry them forward on my journey, and perhaps right them as well "

The mayor stared a moment "You are a knight, sir?"

"No " Behind Robert, the unvisible fey rustled in laughing commerce with his attendant ghosts. The mayor stirred at their noise, as if he could haif-hear "I am a man with a sword "

"Ah " The mayor glanced around his half-deserted marketplace, the spilled lifeblood of his town vacated by the pressure of death's burning reek. His voice was quiet, barely a whisper. when he spoke again. "Wrongs, indeed. A company of the Armies of the Moon quartered here a fortnight ago. When they had drunk every hogshead and keg of ale, mead, or beer to be had, they became displeased. In the end, their captain called down a punishment on the town for withholding supplies " One slack-fingered hand darted out to grab Robert's forearm "They burned my wife, sword-man. She held the keys to the granary and the brewery, and they burned her for not having enough to feed them forever " Tears stood in his eyes

"Who did this thing?" Robert the Brown asked. "Who was their captain?"

The mayor stared at his feet. "A Rose Red I do not know his name, but he was a knight sworn and belted, in their colored armor "

Of course, thought Robert. *These are the lands of the Moon.* In the logic of dream, he would cross the path of the man he sought. Farmers, who lived and died by the lunar cycles and those of the seasons, respected the power of dream, for it was the Moon's dreaming that coaxed the seeds from their shells every spring and brought the blossoms forth

Robert nodded "I will find him He owes me a wrong already I can add another to his tally."

"We do not have much left," said the mayor, "but I can offer you old bread and some stew, and shelter for the night."

After his time in the Moonwood, Robert the Brown was happy enough for some ordinary shelter "Ware my following," he said, wagging a chin across his shoulder at the scarce-visible fey and the flibberty ghosts "I do not command them, and they do not command me, but they seem to go where I do."

"Oh, we have ghosts enough of our own," the mayor said in a voice that was nothing but breath.

When Robert the Brown awoke and left the empty stable where he'd spent a restful night, most of Botolph's Town was out upon the road. Silent as pillars, every right hand pointed east, uphill, along a high road of ancient construction that led out of town and toward the towering heights of the Salt Mountains. Every left hand held a small tan rose, of the variety called Sandalwood, though Robert the Brown could not imagine where the ravaged citizens had found hundreds of them overnight.

As he walked, bare blade over his shoulder as if he were a man setting out to work, Robert saw that two boys and a ghost fell in behind him. Both boys had the look of the mayor about them, sons or nephews perhaps, less haunted in the resilience of youth, but no less disturbed. One carried three leather bags that smelled of cheese, the other an old pole axe Robert would not have used for cutting mistletoe, let alone to fight with. He could not quite see the ghost, but his train of fey and spirits set to buzzing, welcoming it—no, her—into their company.

The mayor's wife, then, fresh from her coal fired bed of pain. Walking to stand witness to whatever justice Robert could find for her. Though he had never seen the Black Madonna's shade, Robert was glad of the woman's company. Her sons would need watching over. His eyes needed to be forward on the world.

The high road that rose from Botolph's Town toward the Salt Mountains had been built in greater days, when men had wielded shovels large enough to make riverbeds and split rocks the size of houses. Barely cobbled now, gone to gravel and grass in many places, the high road still wound with graceful curve and easy grade up the valleys away from the town, into country where the grass was less thick and the trees traded their leaves for needles. Great rams crashed on the hillsides, and elk picked their way along watercourses, while distant bear growled warnings or greetings to one another across the width of dales. Mountain jays and those bluebirds only seen at the heights squawked their insolence and tried to raid Robert and the boys for grain or bread, only to be driven back by the chittering ghosts and the silvered arrows of the tiny fey—as if the supernatural train gained strength from the heights.

After some hours of silence, Robert halted by a stream and sat upon a stone to face the boys. "I am Robert the Brown," he announced, then balanced his sword upon his thighs and spread his hands upon his kneecaps.

"You are the Sandalwood Knight," the younger boy said in a voice that was a reedy echo of the mayor's.

Robert shook his head. "Only a Rose can make another Rose, or one of the kings and queens of the world. I am but a man with a blade."

"Someone made the first rose," the older boy said, and Robert knew from the husk of his tones and the cadence of his syllables how his mother must have spoken. "Someone made you. There were a thousand roses in the street outside your stable this morning."

The invisible fey chittered, chasing some joke among the ghosts. Robert had some idea whose joke it was to set a thousand roses in the street, but he said nothing of that, only nodded. "Walking this road, I will probably be slain. You will certainly be slain. I offer no counsel, merely ask that you consider the choices you make of your life."

"You walk for love," said the older boy. "Everyone can see it in the light in your eyes, the glow of your skin." He exchanged a glance with his brother. "We walk for love, too, of our mother. What they did w... was . . wrong . . and . . ."

His pride dissolved then, into the acid tears of a boy almost grown to manhood. Robert offered a handclasp, but the boy refused, rushing off into a cedar thicket to sob in great whoops.

"I am Carlo," the younger boy said in a voice solemn as chiseled granite, "and my brother who carries both our grief is Mandello."

"Well," said Robert. "If I am the Sandalwood Knight, then you two shall be my squires."

"Oh, but we could not—" Carlo began, then stopped.

"Precisely," Robert smiled.

The invisible entourage chittered and tittered again, loud enough for Carlo to turn and cock his ear at the noise. Robert could swear he saw a woman's smile, sad as a stubbled field after harvest.

Two nights of cold camping, eating cheese, herbs and moss, brought them to a crossroads below a high pass. There was a small camp there, of soldiers not even keeping guard, their tents pitched among the ruins of what was once a great building. Not enough remained for Robert to imagine its form—Caravanserai? Monastery?—but the waist-high berms that remained of the tumbled walls gave them shelter, and in turn bloomed with moss roses and the last tiny draggled flowers of that that mountain summer already racing through autumn.

On their march, Robert had set Carlo and Mandello to cutting figures with staves he chopped for them, so that they might last past the first blow when the fight came. The boys needed to work out their fear and anger, and young muscles took well to the whistling wood, so even amid their grief they occasionally set to mock fencing, with the inevitable crack of staff against wrist or skull.

The pole axe he carried, for fear that Mandello would cut one of their hands off by mistake. At night he cleaned and sharpened the horridly neglected head and bound the haft with ropy twigs stripped from plants along the roadway.

Now, approaching the camp, Robert returned the pole axe to Mandello. "Cut no figures with this," he said in a quiet, urgent voice. "If you have to fight today, it will already be too late, and I don't care to have the edge whistling in the air behind me."

"Yes, sir."

Alongside his brother, Carlo nodded, gripping his own staff as if it were the ladder to the afterlife.

Robert hefted the blade to his shoulder, careful not to slice his own neck, and approached the soldiers. "Hello the camp," he shouted, making himself a clear, and therefore undangerous, target.

A sentry slowly hauled himself up from behind a pillar, stubbing out a rolled smoke into a leather pouch, and laid that hand on a sword hilt. The other hand was missing below the elbow.

Wounded, thought Robert. *They were left here to live or die as each might be able.*

"I call challenge upon you," the soldier said in a bored voice.

"I travel, seeking a red knight of the Roses."

The sentry stared. "Then you are a fool, for Prospero has run mad with the death that flows within his veins." His stump-arm twitched. "His men are mad, too. Go back down to the valleys and return to your farm."

Robert the Brown let the blade slip from his shoulder, so that he held it in one hand as if ready to fight. This was no different from facing down a dog with a taste for killing birds or stock. Turn away, and you granted victory. Stay the course, and the farm would be safe.

"I am no longer a farmer," he said. He might as well use the lie. "I am the Sandalwood Knight, and I claim redress from Prospero the Red."

The sentry laughed even as his wounded fellows ghosted in behind him. A sharp breeze came up, and a shower of pale brown petals swirled between Robert and the soldiers.

The rose Sandalwood, called once more by his ghostly retinue.

"Ah," said the sentry, even as several of the wounded with him made warning signs.

"I will not fight unless you force me to it," Robert said. "I can pass you by, none of us the worse."

"He didn't go to the White Cities," growled a one-eyed veteran with leather covering his cheeks and jaw. "He went up."

A thicket of hands, some fingerless, some trembling, pointed to the right, toward the southeast, where the crossroads sent a trail following the higher slope of one of the greatest of the Salt Mountains.

"What does he seek there?" Robert the Brown asked in spite of himself.

"To be closer to his god," muttered someone of the wounded, who was then cuffed to silence.

"I follow him there," Robert told the men. "Step forward, stand aside, or join me as you see fit."

His ghosts and fey swirled through the camp then, meeting the ghosts of the freshly dead and welcoming them to the next world, while the boys brought forth cheese from Carlo's bags, which seemed endlessly full that chill, high day.

The living feasted on cheese and jerked meat, while the dead danced among the brown rose petals as a thin snow swirled overhead, the weather never quite finding the courage to interrupt their revels.

The next morning when Robert the Brown set out, the one-armed sentry joined him and the boys. No words were spoken, but the chittering train of ghosts and fey also seemed larger than ever. He wondered a moment at this, then set it aside. As he climbed the trail, wrapped in woolens donated by the lately dead from the wounded camp, Robert thought on the Black Madonna and presently began to sing.

He began with the songs he'd sung amid his fields, wordless music hummed to draw the grain forth from the plow-broken land and set the beans to curling. Her grave was a furrow, she the single seed, the sword her fruit, and he the stalk that carried her memory back into the world.

Robert then shifted to words, the chants that called up the moon and pulled down the rain, or so the farmers like to tell themselves, songs meant to speak to the natural world in its own tongue and terms, that cycled back upon themselves in endless iteration no more or less than the life of the fields did.

Then he came to love, ideals of life, the beauty of women and her in particular. Though he'd only know her for moments, the emotion that had seized him was like lightning in his veins, fit to last a lifetime, as if he had touched the daughter of an angel. He sang of the touching they had never shared, and never would. He sang of how her laugh would echo in his ears across the memory of seasons. He sang of how she walked, the life that sprang from every step as she moved like water over rock. He sang of the tastes and feel and measures of her body, the years of her life, building a picture in music of a woman he barely knew.

It was only her death he avoided. By singing of her, by keeping her in his head and in his heart, he kept the Black Madonna alive.

He'd learned enough since her death to know how dangerous she had been. Whatever heart-hurt or hatred she'd acted out upon the bodies of men had left her that day they met, and she had dropped her guard until Prospero took her life.

Well, by the gods and seasons, he could not restore breath to her body, but he could carry her in his head and heart until the light of her bled into the world.

"You already do," said the sentry, the first words anyone had spoken that day outside the circle of Robert's singing.

"I'm sorry. I did not mean to speak."

Carlo laughed. "Mother told us your thoughts. Your ghost train was running out your words, though your eyes were too high-set to see it."

Robert had to laugh, too, at that.

The dam had broken then, and the soldier, whose name was Milese, began to speak the story of his days. Carlo and Mandello listened, then spoke of their young lives in Botolph's Town and the beauty of their mother. At the first mention of her, Milese flinched, but whatever was in the boys' hearts did not include a grudge against the one-handed soldier.

Robert just listened then, to their chatter, the ebb and flow of three folk coming to know one another as companions, perhaps even friends. The ghosts listened too, the fey skipping around his feet now visible as shadows at noon, almost whole in this thin, high air.

When the talk finally wound to a companionable silence, he asked a question that had concerned him for some time. "What is up here that the knight Prospero thinks it will bring him closer to his god?"

"Ah." said Milese. "Prospero came from another time and place. He was not born of these countries. There is an ancient palace upon this mountain, the Ice Halls, where some of his people once lived and died. After the disaster of the Battle of Morningfields, he seized upon a need to come here. Though we took our time and rioted across the lands upon our way."

"So I noted," Robert answered dryly.

"I am sorry," the soldier said. His voice was slow and heavy. "We lost many at Morningfields and were reprimanded by the Moon herself. Our company has traveled since in fear and disgrace, escaping what we are."

"Did you fight poorly?"

"We were whelmed. Some did not do as they should."

That was all the soldier would say on the matter, though Mandello kept questioning him until Robert made the boy stop.

Near dusk the road had begun a long, sweeping switchback up the high face of the mountain. Robert's chest ached as he breathed, and his knees were weak with the walking. As the daystar fled west over the sea, he saw a flare high up on the peak.

"That is it," said Milese. "The Ice Halls, which trap the day for a moment, brilliant as any jewel."

"All men will stumble at that height," Robert said, thinking on what might come as a fight.

"All men stumble," Milese answered. "Some get to choose when and where, some do not."

They stopped and camped with the boys, grateful for the dead men's wool. Even the ghosts were visible tonight, so that the four who lived were among a whole unsleeping company. They did not bother to set a sentry, though they kept their fire covered, dampened down coals.

Robert and Milese talked long into the night, of the small things that make up the lives of men, while the boys dozed and cried out for their mother. Her shade stayed close, but there is ever little comfort to be stretched from the dead to the living. All through the night, lights flashed high up on the peak, high magics or great works going on within the Ice Halls.

Neither man made further mention of what lay ahead.

Dawn brought a lassitude that seemed only partially borne out of the heights at which they were camped. Nonetheless, Robert the Brown rose and exercised a while with the blade, punishing the twigs and branches of an aspen copse severely, before rousing his fellow travelers.

Though the soldier was careful to say nothing, his movements betrayed how the morning chill had brought a bitter pain to Milese's wounded arm. Robert likewise said nothing, but made sure that he or the boys were always ready to help when Milese moved from task to task in the breaking of the camp.

Too soon, without sufficient food in their bellies, they were on the trail again, climbing now almost as steep as stairs toward the Ice Halls. While Robert fully expected that he might be struck down by Prospero or the troops who followed the Red Knight, he had to plan for his return to the Black Madonna as well—which meant keeping some food in his pouch. It would do him no good to avenge her, then starve on the road home.

And so they marched up to the heights. As they walked, their steps slowed more and more, feet turning to wooden blocks barely able to manage the trail. Robert's legs shivered with cramp and

cold and the steepness of the trail. His lungs burned, aching with a cold so intense it was hot. The small bones in his hands complained, harbingers of old age's miseries, and his eyes teared with the crisp temperature.

Even the chittering ghosts, which had become more visible in the ultramontane air and thin, piercing sunlight, seemed to lose energy as they gained substance. Their thread-thin visages swelled into puffy ropes, as if Robert and his party were surrounded by the web-wisps of vast, drunken spiders. Their cries and whispers subsided to a sort of ritualized grumbling, like old soldiers in a tavern damning the officers of campaigns half a century gone for the loss of their finger, their toes, their manhood, and their youth.

Only the weak fey who had followed his path seemed to prosper. They could be seen now, an indeterminate assemblage of tiny silver-skinned men leaping from rock to rock, slinging sparkling stones and nocking tiny arrows against the insolent moss and truculent brush growing at this altitude.

To Robert it seemed as if his spirit were leeching away in a river that flowed from him, through Milese and the boys, past the ghosts, and into the sea of sparkling need that was the little fey.

He considered setting to them with the sword, as he had the ghosts back in the Moonwood, but that did not feel right to him. The sword knew what it wanted, was an extension of the Black Madonna, and these little fey and their ghostly friends had followed him now for days from their home. He owed them the courtesy of the journey, if nothing else. And somehow they would figure in what lay ahead.

The trail eventually found a roadbed again, one that switchbacked up the vast pier of a granite cliff. This road had been patched and cobbled and recobbled, and the recent passage of Prospero's reduced company had opened something of a path through the ice and snow. At one turn, his hand on a statue of a man serving as roadpost, long since worn to featureless suggestion, Robert the Brown raised his face and looked to the west.

Far below them was the crossroads with the camp of Prospero's wounded, Milese's fellows. His eye traced a path downward through woods and valleys to the edge of the Moonwood, where Botolph's Town lay. A quilt of other towns and farms filled that land east of the Moonwood, then the forest itself glimmered dark and green in the advancing shadow, a blanket of ghosts and fear stretching to the distant coastal mountains and, somewhere there, Robert's abandoned farm.

Somehow, even from here, the Black Madonna's grave was visible to him, a distant spark over the horizon that he'd never quite lost sight of.

The thought of her filled him with energy and purpose. Robert the Brown, the Sandalwood Knight, straightened his back and began to talk aloud, recounting to her the days and miles of his journey just as if he were standing by her grave.

His words picked up his feet, and he walked once more as if bound for glory, swinging the blade while the words continued to spill forth. Milese, Carlo, and Mandello followed close behind, finding their way to the same spirit of energy that had seized Robert.

Soon they strode onto a great apron of stone and ice, bordered by the same smooth statues of the ancient, indifferent dead that had lined the road, and saw the Ice Halls before them just in that moment when the cluster of timeless palaces caught the setting sun and made a blaze for the entire sky to witness.

To Robert, it was no different from the fire he'd walked into every day since the death of the Black Madonna, and so he strode forward into the glittering red and gold glare.

The others followed, while the silvery fey ran ahead as little fires of their own and the ropy ghosts spread around the living, whispering the name of Carlo and Mandello's mother.

The shadows arrived at the burnished doors of the first and greatest of the Ice Halls just as Robert the Brown did. Two soldiers stood guard, wearing woolen cloaks of the same weave and cut as those of the wounded at the crossroads. The same as Robert and his party wore. They seemed to take no notice of the dancing fey and the drifting ghosts.

"I see you made it," said the left-hand sentry. He was a tall man, with a hooked nose and hooded eyes that were already vanishing into darkness. "Sir Prospero has been expecting you these past few days."

"You're still an idiot, Brot," muttered Milese.

Brot's lips quirked into a twitching smile. "And you're still a cripple."

"Our battle at the crossroads was something of a mutiny," Milese said quietly, pitching his voice to Robert. "Revolt against what our company had become. Those of us who fought for ... decency were released from our oaths. Brot here is a fire-setter."

The smell of burnt flesh flooded Robert the Brown's nostrils then—doubtless a sending from the mayor's wife. Behind him, he heard a quick, stifled sob. *Mandello*, he thought, pitying the boy.

"It does not matter," Brot said, his voice hard now. "My Lord Prospero has asked that you come before him. You are free men in his halls. For now."

"Fair enough." Robert the Brown cut a set of figures with his blade, conscious that his farmer's blocking and plow-slow muscles would look like so much bluff to this veteran of a dozen battles. He still felt a need to make a show of the Black Madonna's sword. He finished his movements and touched the tip to the ice between his feet. "We are ready."

Brot and his fellow threw open the gates. Robert was pleased to note that the ghosts flowed through the sentries, setting them to gagging and dropping. Brot to his knees. He hoped the reek of burnt flesh never left the man's nose again.

Inside the gates was a courtyard where weapons were racked and gear stacked. No one seemed stationed there—too cold, but great slab-faced walls of ice and granite and bronze rose beyond the court, in a style of architecture as cyclopean as any of the ancient days. The tiny fey formed a skirmish line and led Robert and his fellows toward a huge, dark entrance becoming gloomier by the moment in evening shadows.

He had no reason not to follow them. Prospero would make his presence known soon enough, then Robert the Brown and the Red Knight would have their second meeting.

Their last meeting.

As they approached the inner gate, Robert heard the outer gates slam shut, the two sentries coughing and cursing as they withdrew to follow him deeper into the Ice Halls. Ahead the second gate loomed like a vast, vertical grave, set to take the corpse of some slain giant.

He walked through with his head high, following his fey, flanked by his ghosts, backed by Milese and the boys.

Inside, Prospero sat upon an ancient throne at the center of a vast hall lit only by a brazier at the Red Knight's left side. Blades glittered in the darkness around him, the fire shining the eyes of a company of warriors—sixty or more. Robert the Brown estimated with the same facility with which he once counted sheep in a field—a company that outnumbered his little party by such a margin as to be meaningless.

His fey followers and the ghosts vanished into the darkness. Deserting Robert in this place of power, he wondered, or just pursuing their own ends now that his journey had found completion.

Prospero's throne was as cyclopean as the palace itself, carved from a block of flaking sandstone that must have been hauled up the mountain from some distant quarry. Indistinct figures chased themselves across the arms, lent life by the flickering light of the brazier. It was if men and animals leapt in dancing embrace to lift the Red Knight upward into the fire-limned shadow.

The Red Knight himself was clad in a simple leather tunic, a wool coat over it as plain as any of his men's. He held a blade across his

lap There was a leather bag at his feet, large enough for a melon Or a human head

"Welcome, farmer," Prospero said in a voice that took on the aspect of the winds, rushing through the hall in endless muted echoes.

"A trick of the architecture," whispered Milese.

"I am a farmer, not an idiot," Robert the Brown whispered back, with humor in his voice Then, loudly: "It is you that I see again We have met before, Sir Prospero "

"At the edge of a field, west of the Moonwood, some four summers ago, I do believe." Prospero's fingers caressed the pommel of his sword. His accent had a familiar outlander lilt. "What will you have of me now, farmer?"

What would I have of the rain? Robert thought *The sun, the soil, the wolf, the tax man* A farmer's life is nothing but bending to the will of the forces of nature, And with luck, thinking past them and ahead. But he was no farmer anymore, to employ the lessons of ox and plow.

"I left my fields in search of vengeance," the Sandalwood Knight said. "You took the life of a woman I have come to love." He paused, to settle his sword tip-down between his feet The next words came hard, against what he thought he had been marching across the miles for "But I have seen vengeance " Robert nodded over his shoulder at Milese and Carlo and Mandello "Vengeance leaves a man with no hand to earn his daily bread. Vengeance leaves two boys with no mother to finish the raising of them."

A shadow crossed Prospero's face against the leaping of the flame, some pang of conscience or pain of misjudgment

"I do not accuse," Robert went on "I do not know enough to accuse. I only ask for restoration. Give me back what you took from her, and I shall go "

Prospero laughed. "She'd have taken your life, boy, quick as a horse snaps at a fly and with no more thought She was the *Black Madonna* She'd killed a hundred men You owe me your life, son I do not owe you hers."

"She listened to me," he said. "What might have been, what was possible, was between us " Robert the Brown shrugged. "It was not for you."

"I did a good deed " Prospero seemed pained now. "And despite whatever judgment I still possess, I am about to do another " He leaned forward across his blade "You and your young squires . may take service in my company In following me across the lands, in finding me here, you have shown your worth. That knighthood you style yourself with might even be earned in time "

"Or you slay me where I stand?" Robert asked, remembering the pleading eyes of the mayor of Botolph's Town, and the terrible stench of the burned woman It had been this man who had ravaged an entire village, or at least his words driving others before him

"Why should I?" Prospero laughed. "It would be enough to turn you out the gates and tell you to find your own way home."

In that moment, with those words, Robert the Brown saw how far from home Prospero really was Milese had spoken truly He took up the word-threads that the Black Madonna spun within him, gathered his breath, and launched his greatest sally

"You suffer, Red Knight, from the distance you have traveled I have come a mere few weeks from my fields, and here in your icy halls I may as well be living within another life You have come across a gulf of years and uncrossable seas Lay down your arms and come back with me Find a simple peace in the land "

Taking another breath, Robert the Brown already knew that his poor words had not been enough.

"Turn them out," Prospero said.

The glittering blades moved in the darkness. Robert the Brown raised his blade to ready even as Milese and the boys stepped close behind him.

Then the fey lit their tailfires with a howl like bobcats trapped in a forest blaze, while the ropy ghosts began to spin out their terror.

The fight was short and bloodless. Cold, tired men who've marched a country's distance under an angry maniac aren't inclined to face screaming terror with the scent of their mother's dying breath. Robert the Brown found his river of spunt bursting open like a dam, until light leaked from his pores and the lamps of eyes were blinding and blinded, lending strength to the angry spirits who followed him. They in turn summoned a storm of brown rose petals to blow like a blizzard through the ancient hall, catching fire from the brazier and lifting sweet-smelling sparks into the distant roofbeams while the men of Prospero's company stumbled and shrieked. It was a swirling storm of scent and sound, that fight in the dark, and Robert the Brown shrugged off his light and the draining of his soul to meet blade-to-blade with Prospero as the Red Knight rose from his throne.

Then it was done. The men were gone, huddled in shadows or burst from the doors Prospero stood before his throne, trapped between Mandello's antique pole axe, Milese's wrong-handed sword, and the borrowed blade of the Black Madonna, which glowed like dawn's first outrider. The ghosts gibbered in a whirling mass around them while the fey danced a tiny, spike-stepped victory dance at the feet of the remaining combatants.

"Still I will not take vengeance from you," Robert the Brown said slowly, though the tremble in his hands and the glow of his blade gave lie to the words.

"What, then," asked Prospero Betraying no panic, he gently set his sword upon the gritty stone floor.

"Give me what is hers, and swear peace between us. I have had enough of fighting. The land calls to me."

"Land. Hah. You command ghosts, fey, and men, and you speak as if the soil were your mistress. You are lost to the land, my friend Sandalwood."

"I am no knight," Robert said. His voice was sad, despite his intentions. "I will go back to her, return her sword and head, and take up the plow once more "

The ghosts rustled, while the dancing step of the tiny fey changed its measure

"As you will." Prospero reached carefully back for the leather bag. "Here is her head. Take it with my blessing. I will not trouble you, but I will tell you that as a Rose Knight you will know no peace Sun and Moon will come to accommodation as soon as Sister Ocean climbs these peaks They sing of love, our brothers and sisters, but we all crave the blood on our thorns far more than the pollen that passes between those of like intent."

"Ghosts," shouted Robert the Brown. "You are free to follow me as you will, but I release you to your next life. Fey, this palace is yours as you wish it My path is open to you as well."

There was more chittering and scuttling in the dark as the ropy ghosts and dancing fey faded

"And us?" asked Carlo. "Are we to dwell here, eating ice until Sir Prospero forswears himself and has us cast from a cliff?"

"If you wish to follow the plow, follow me." Robert the Brown placed the blade once more on his shoulder, where there was a callus to receive it, took up the leather bag, and walked out into the night

The Sandalwood Knight led thirty-two men and

a train of ghosts and fey back to his fields. He harassed them every evening by the fire, abjured the fey and exorcised the ghosts. He sent one patrol then another on distant missions to places from which they would not wish to return. He tried to hire them to villages as they passed. Botolph's Town they avoided, though Carlo and Mandello returned briefly before joining the company on the road farther on.

"They call you the Farmer King," said Milese as he and Robert approached the Black Madonna's grave. Though the burning smell was gone, and frost had come with the turning of the year, Robert

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ROB ALEXANDER: ADDING UP FANTASTIC PATTERNS

Atlantis

"FANTASY ILLUSTRATION ALLOWS ME TO INSERT THAT WONDERFUL ELEMENT OF "WHAT IF" WHEN I LOOK AT THE REAL WORLD," ROB SAYS.

BY KAREN HABER

"Watercolor requires planning ten steps ahead," says acclaimed artist Rob Alexander. "Like math. Any composition has got to operate on a purely abstract level." Rob speaks of his art with the accuracy and precision one would expect of a mathematician. That isn't so surprising when you consider that he set out to follow a career in Math until Art, specifically watercolor, led him astray.

"It was Alan Lee's watercolor that hit me between the eyes and made me want to sit down and try it. Watercolor just made sense to me—I could do what I wanted to do with the paint. Oils turned to muddy goo, and acrylics dried too quickly and were permanent. Water- color felt right, it felt like coming home to something. I could make it do what I wanted to do." If mathematics is a science of patterns—and mathematicians see the world as a series of abstract patterns—then Rob hasn't traveled so very far from his first love as he creates illustrations for magazines, book jackets, and collectable card games like "Magic the Gathering," and "Lord of the Rings, and conceptual design work for video, computer and card games.

Growing up on the edge of the Canadian Rockies may have con- tributed to the dominance of landscape work in his oeuvre. "The sky just went on forever," he recalls. "I draw primary inspiration from my childhood environment, no question." That inspiration can be seen in works such as "Horror's Vale" and "Soul burn," where vast, snow— covered mountain peaks frame scenes of fantastic strangeness.

Rob was one of the original artists for "Magic: the Gathering," and has created roughly 160 images for that game. His work can also be seen in over 10 other games including "The Lord of the Rings," "Shadowfist," "Legend of the Five Rings," and "Vampire: The Masquer- ade."

"Fantasy illustration allows me to insert that wonderful ele- ment of "what if" when I look at the real world," Rob says. "The ability to tell a story in the work is such a crucial element for me, so I savor those moments when I look at the world and my imagination takes that leap into fantasy." Watercolor is a notoriously difficult medium to master, but he has not only mastered it, he makes what he does look easy. His beautiful, evocative paintings often resemble acrylics, and, occasionally, oils. The latter effect can be seen in works such as the award-winning "Sinja's World."

"It's the arrangement of shapes and values that can convey a mood for me," Rob says. "One way I check on it is by holding the painting up in the mirror, squinting to see how the light masses are reading. I also check on the painting upside down."

Rob's skill with pen and pencil is considerable as well, and can be appreciated in "Unicorn Grove," and the final drawing for "Ghost Slayer." His sketches are marked by precision of line but also manage to convey palpable emotion.

"I tend to doodle on napkins, carry a sketch book with me, have the sketchbook by the bed, and keep an artist's journal. It's so useful for flipping through for ideas. In a sense I've provided some of my own reference material."

Honors Vale

"I really enjoy the sketching process. It's an opportunity to churn out ideas. Perhaps because I work in watercolor there's some- thing so incredibly freeing about picking up a Sharpie and just drawing. It's the antithesis of watercolor."

Rob generously shares some of the tricks of his trade in his latest book, *Welcome to My Worlds: The Art of Rob Alexander* (Paper Tiger) and on his website www.robalexander.com. "One of the key goals of my work is to create a sense of depth," he says. "I find it extremely compelling." He gives as an example the work "The Elf King's Hall," painted for "The Lord of the Rings" card game. In this work, Rob breaks all the rules by making emptiness the center of the piece: he depicts the entrance to the Elf King's abode at the top of a vine-covered staircase. The door, if any, is invisible in the gloom of the overhanging entrance, and the shadows cast a powerful sense of foreboding and mystery.

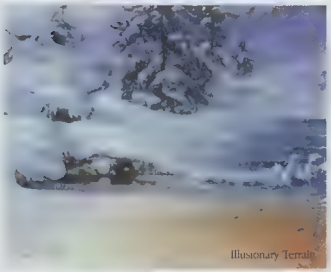
"For this painting, I thought, we don't need another fabulous rendition of the hall, can't I show something else? Maybe the ser vant's entrance or play with it, creating mood, showing something gloomy and ominous? A tiny little sketch the size of a postage stamp in my sketchbook led me to the final painting.

It sucks you right into the dark space and leaves your imagination to take over—and that's the reason the piece is so effect- ive. If I put a monster in the front of it that would rob the viewer of the opportunity to participate."

For Rob, creating art for the "Lord of the Rings" card game was a special treat. "Just getting a chance to work with subject matter I've loved since I was a little kid is very satisfying. I'm intimately familiar with the material. However, it's very difficult to translate the emotions I have in reaction to the material into images.

Sonja's World

Peril Unchained



Illusionary Terrain

Tolkien wrote enough to spark imagination, but not a lot of visual detail, so it's a challenge. Any time I had a painting in- volving Gandalf or the Elves—some of my favorite characters — was a pleasure. Sometimes the character cards presented a different creative challenge, when I had to maintain continuity of a charac- ter's appearance from other card sets in the same game."

In addition to Alan Lee, Rob counts Frank Frazetta among his artistic heroes. "When I was growing up—and the only exposure was book jackets. Later, in junior high, I began to learn art history. The old masters—Albert Bierstadt, Church, Sargent, Parrish, Vermeer, Rembrandt—were immensely inspirational. Look at what Church was doing with his lighting and approach to landscape. It was the same thing that Vermeer was doing with his interiors. They were both fascinated with the play of light and how that can basically tell you a story."

What draws him to the artwork of others?

"If there's something in there that lets me get inside the mind of the artist and understand what they were thinking while they were painting—that grabs me. If the work tells me a story. Perhaps that's why I never liked abstract art. Even if it's a very personal exploration for the artist, it doesn't communicate meaningfully to me, and so I have no connection with that image.

"People really respond to strong storytelling, and if they feel that they can participate—find meaning—then it's satisfying. It's an act of communication."

Rob's work can be subject or mood driven, depending upon the assignment. He says that he doodles out a bunch of thumbnail sketch- es until the right one presents itself.

"You have to be able to see the entire painting before you start it, where to protect your whites and such. Watercolor requires a lot of preplanning. After all, you can't control the elements. You're mixing paint with water and things are going to happen."

Unlike many artists, Rob looks forward to accidents. "When the unexpected happens, that livens it up. I call it a happy accident and I'm so comfortable with the medium that I can anticipate when that might happen. So when they do I just run with them. They are a wonderfully creative part of the process and can bring a lot of life to the painting."

Despite Rob's careful planning, he's not aiming for photorealism. In fact, that's the last thing he wants. "Many of my paintings are truly imaginary landscapes. For example, in 'Blue Mountain Dwarf Hold,' I 'frankensteined' images, combining different parts from different places. I can put in mountains that I think will fit with the river, and so on. I can reverse the lighting, cloudy to sunny or vice versa, regardless of what the reference material shows."

Rob's new book, *How to Draw and Paint Fantasy Landscapes*, from Quarto Publishing (released in the U.S. by Barrons) is due out in 2006. "I'm very pleased with it, especially a panorama in it, 'Ancient Places,' originally painted for Wizards of the Coast, measuring 9.5 inches by 53 inches. It's a long forest scene in greens, blues, and browns. It's in a detailed step by step section where I show all the different drawings for it as well as several work in progress shots. Panoramas are extremely challenging paintings to do."

Other works of which Rob is especially proud are "World View," also painted for Wizards of the Coast, an eight inch by 48 inch panorama containing five color schemes—and terrain—equating with the five colors of magic in the game, and a series of land cards just released in a new set by WOTC.

His advice to beginning watercolorists? "Sit down and mess around with color on paper. It's sensual and satisfying and you'll learn which colors will shine through others, which ones kill others, which sit on top and can be lifted out. Get to know the paints."

Rob admits that it's a challenge to manage deep color effects in his chosen medium. "Achieving intensity of color in watercolor is very difficult. For rich, intense colors, you have to put in a lot of glazes, which definitely runs the risk of turning to mud if you disturb the under layers with the later ones. For really saturated or dark colors, that's where you have to just load up the brush with a lot of paint and go into an area all at once, do it, and get out. After that—because there is so much paint there—anything you do to the area will dilute the saturation, remove paint, or make a mess.

'In 'The Elf King's Hall,' the darkness inside the entry was one big wash, put in with lots of paint. I had about 15 minutes of working time before the paper dried too much to allow the paint to flow.'

You have to gird your loins, go in and do it all at once, and then leave it all alone. You get one shot at it, and if it doesn't work, throw the painting away and start again!'

'When I paint the paper is flat and the shadows can appear darker and richer, so sometimes I prop the painting up and look at it. It's important to doublecheck it because perception of color and value changes depending upon what angle you're viewing the work from.

My working time depends upon the amount of time it takes that layer of water to evaporate. In summer it dries faster than in winter. Most paintings take me between three and five days to finish. There comes a point—usually when the Fed Ex truck arrives—when I have to stop.

Rob's careful planning extends into the future, where he hopes to do a bit more storytelling. "I'd like to do children's books, I think. And I'd like to parlay my fantasy work into more of a fine art career where I'm painting primarily for myself, to sit back tell my own stories." ia

ON ICE OR EN POINTE, THE HARVEST QUEEN WILL ALWAYS EXACT HER REVENGE ...

By Patrice E. Sarath
Illustration by Eric Dinyer

One night in a distant city, the snow began to fall and never stopped. It dropped on the wide avenues, filled street corners with sculpted drifts, and filigreed railings, grates, and trash. The dark subway entrances were closed. In the grand concourse of the train station, snow spilled in from the street, cascading over the marble stairs and glittering in the dim light of the ceiling's heaven. The only way in and out of the city was on foot and the great bridge which saw a terrible exodus that one day years ago, ushered people across its snowy span. Only a few made the journey; most took one glimpse at the surging gray waters under the icy bridge and turned back.

Delacour leaned back against the locker room wall and briefly closed his eyes. He fought the sleepiness. It helped that his arm was being maneuvered into a sling—a check into the boards had dislocated his shoulder. It was an old injury. The pain seared and he made a sound. The trainer glanced up at him and tugged ruthlessly.

"Almost done," he said. Delacour nodded, thinking that the pain was better than the strange stupor that had come over him lately. The endless snow made him want to sleep for hours. He thought he played as well as he always did, but that morning he had to be roused out of bed by the team manager banging on his hotel room door.

"All right," the trainer said, helping him up. "Get that looked at later," he added. Delacour heard it from a long way away, the pain having receded enough to let the weariness wash completely over him.

He showered and dressed with difficulty, and by the time he finished almost all of his teammates were out the door. They were going to a bar in midtown, they said, and he promised to come. Out of habit he checked messages. Cynthia had called. She had watched the game at home—she said she was worried about his injury. Call me, she said. Delacour stared down at the phone for a long moment, then closed it and put it in his pocket. He wrestled his arm into his coat and set off for the bar.

He had to walk several blocks, and the cold began to wake him up. Snow bit at his face and puffed over his shoes, gathering in frozen clumps along the bottoms of his jeans. Delacour pulled

up the collar of his heavy jacket and hunched against the cold. He winced as his shoulder woke with fresh pain.

Bells jingled behind him and Delacour turned at the sweet, loud sound to see a horse-drawn sleigh coming down the street. He watched, snow frosting his dark hair, and the sleigh swept past him in the narrow space, the horses' heads bowed in twin black arches. Steam blew from their reddened nostrils. Delacour caught only a glimpse of the passengers—three women and two men, bundled in furs and cloth coats. One woman turned to look at him as they slid past, sleek sable rising around her face from her hood, putting her eyes in shadow.

Walking into the long, narrow bar, Delacour was greeted by his teammates at the far end with cheers in English and French. At the other end by the door, sitting at two small tables, were the five passengers who had passed Delacour in their sleigh. All of them looked up at his approach.

He nodded curtly to the woman with the hooded eyes—she had slipped off her cape and let it spill over the back of her chair. She wore a yellow dress with a high Chinese collar. Her lips were very pale, her eyes and hair dark. She was not beautiful—her nose was a blade-like structure in her narrow face. It should have made her seem masculine. It did not. Delacour slid onto a bar stool pushed out for him by one of his teammates, glad to be able to put his back to her.

Over in one corner Albrecht was holding court, his teammates roaring with laughter at something he said. He turned around at Delacour's entrance but pointedly turned back.

"Hey man, you're good!" said Yun the goalie in his accented English, sliding over a beer and nodding at Delacour's shoulder. Delacour shrugged expressionally. His shoulder twinged, the look on his face was enough for both of them.

"I'll be ready tomorrow." He didn't know who he was trying to fool. He didn't want to play anymore. He thought about his home, his bed. His wife. He wanted to sleep.

The attention had shifted to Delacour from Albrecht, so the rookie swiveled around. He shook out a cigarette from a pack on the bar.

"If you ask me," he said to everyone in the tight little room, "I'm ready to get banged up for a day off." He bent to light the cigarette, his lips tight. Smoke billowed around his head and he snapped the lighter shut. From the end of the bar, the bartender fished out a dusty ashtray and slid it down to Albrecht.

"That's not what I did," Delacour said, and immediately wished he hadn't said anything.

Albrecht laughed. He was ten years younger than Delacour, only nineteen. This was his first year in the pros. He skated without a care, which is not to say carelessly, and he was nicknamed "Invisible," for the way he could suddenly seem to disappear and then reappear in front of the opposition's goal with the puck. Three weeks ago he had jumped over a fallen defenseman, skates flashing in the air, puck hanging in front of his stick as if attached by a wire—the photo could be seen in almost every sports magazine in the world.

Movement caught his eye and Delacour turned. The woman from the sleigh came toward him, her dress whispering against her slender form. He had the uneasy feeling he knew the texture of the yellow dress, the silk against her skin, the fur she left spilled carelessly across her chair. He felt the weight of his teammates' attention—even Albrecht had stopped talking. She held out her hand to Delacour, and he took it, her fingers swallowed up in his until he let go.

"I must apologize," she told Delacour. "Had we known you were coming here, we would not have let you trudge in the snow." Her accent was eastern European, like Yuri's.

Albrecht was suddenly beside him, clapping Delacour on his bad shoulder, ignoring his wince of pain, the flash of anger that was as quickly dampened.

"Delacour here doesn't mind the snow. He's a country boy."

Albrecht held out his cigarettes. She regarded him steadily, unsurprised by his sudden approach, and drew a cigarette from the pack. He lit it for her, cupping his hand around hers to hold the cigarette steady. She looked up at him through the thin veil of smoke, her dark eyes shrouded.

One of the men from her group came up behind her, claiming her with a possessive hand on her shoulder. He wore evening clothes, a silk scarf draped elegantly over his suit, and his hair was slightly damp from the weather. He was as tall as Delacour but slender, his shoulders narrow. Only his hands gave him away—they could not be disguised with expensive clothes. His hands were gnarled, the knuckles enlarged and the skin rough and red. Delacour's eyes were drawn to those hands. The man saw the direction of his gaze and for a moment their eyes met, and then the man looked at the woman.

"She felt very badly for you," he said. "I told her, no no, he is busy, see he walks quickly, he can take care of himself tonight."

She blew a long trail of smoke in the direction of the bar, and without turning to look at the man, she said, "It would have been no trouble, Hilaire, to have stopped and asked."

The man's face tightened. "Should you be smoking, my love? Your heart—"

She smiled a secret smile, looking down at her cigarette.

"Just this once, darling," she said. "Once can't hurt, can it? And it keeps me warm." She turned and smiled brilliantly at Albrecht, who smiled back.

"Ah," the man said, but he threw up his hands in mock surrender. "You know I can deny you nothing," he said. He included Delacour in his conspiratorial grin, the one that said, *Women!* to other men. Delacour just nodded, but the man was not deterred. "So you are from the country? Where? What brings you to the city?"

"Hockey," said Delacour, limiting himself to the last question. He straightened and half-gestured around himself at the team. The man brightened.

"Hockey," he said. He dropped his shoulder and mimed throwing a puck, landing it lightly against Delacour's bad shoulder. "Like that?"

Delacour was getting tired of people hitting him. "No," he snapped.

"Darling," said the woman. She stubbed out her cigarette and laid a hand on the man's arm, her hand pale against his black overcoat. Delacour was reminded of the way Cynthia placed her hand on his arm at parties when he drank too much, talked too much. She turned to Delacour. "He means no harm," she said, giving a deprecating smile. "He forgets that not all people are like him. Sometimes I think it was wrong to leave our little village for the wider world."

"Now, my dear," the man said, "our new friends will think we are simple country folk."

He removed her hand from his arm with barely disguised violence, gripping it so hard her fingers were folded in upon themselves. She did not cry out but color stood out on her pale cheeks and her eyes glistened.

Delacour stood and grabbed the man's wrist. Startled the man let go. Then he smiled nastily.

"You are a gallant man," he said. He jerked his hand away. "Take my advice—save it for a woman who deserves it."

He stalked back to his companions. Albrecht, Delacour, and the woman were left to look at one another.

"You Ok?" Albrecht said finally. He wore a look of faint shock, casting nervous glances between her and Delacour, as if he wondered what he had stepped into. She smiled a little, tears sparkling on her cheeks. Her hands shook as she rubbed her hurt fingers. Albrecht lit another cigarette and handed it to her, and she drew on it thankfully.

"Thank you," she said. "I apologize—he tries so hard, but I think that only makes it worse." She sighed. "I think we were never meant to be." She looked at Albrecht, waiting.

Albrecht shifted uncomfortably. "Well, hey. You should

probably sleep on it, you know. Things always look better in the morning."

A rush of emotions crossed her face in the split second before she looked away. Surprise. Disappointment. Malice. The latter sharpened her next words.

"I see. Trite but true, no doubt." She stubbed out her cigarette and slid off the stool. "Perhaps we will come to one of your matches," she said. She nodded at her companions, now standing and getting into their long coats. "You must come to the ballet. Our engagement has been extended because of the snow." She turned to Delacour. "It is our apology, for leaving you to walk in the snow."

"Giselle!" the man called out. He held up her fur. She looked at him and then back at the others.

"He's such a peasant," she said, and walked back to her table.

suit, stroking the fine wool for a moment before letting the tailor hang it up. He had never owned a suit so fine—the tux he was married in carried with it the shape of all the men who had ever said their vows in it.

Cynthia would be surprised that he had gone to see a ballet. He felt suddenly pulled to call her and tell her about it. Delacour even turned to pick up the phone, its message light blinking patiently as it had been for days, and stopped with his hand outstretched. No. He would have to tell her about Albrecht too. He imagined her hanging up the phone to go sit back down to dinner with the kids, crying over Albrecht.

He would tell her later, after the ballet, to soften the blow. Delacour tucked the tickets into his jacket pocket and rubbed his fingers against the slick cardboard. When he got home he could take her to the ballet in Montreal.

Cynthia would be surprised that he had gone to see a ballet. He felt suddenly pulled to call her and tell her about it.

The man draped the fur around her shoulders and kept his hands on her shoulders. He spoke something to the others in their party, and then they swept out the door without looking back.

"Delacour!"

Delacour leaped up, disoriented, in his darkened hotel room: gray light coming in between the thick curtains. He stared around himself, breathing hard. He had been dreaming, but all he could remember were images of fur and ice and the woman in the bar.

A sharp rapping came at his door. He fumbled shakily out of bed and staggered over to the door, unlocking it and peering into the hall. He had to blink several times to focus.

"Delacour," the manager said, his face ashen under the sallow hall lights. It looked like half the team was behind him. "It's Albrecht."

The rookie had had a heart attack in his sleep. The police and emergency response team had come on foot over the frozen, snow-packed streets, but he had been gone for far too long—now the coroner's office had him, and the city's machinery ground into action.

The team stayed at the hotel bar that day, talking over their shock. Delacour hardly listened, worrying at the memory of his dream. The more he thought about it, the more he thought that Albrecht had been in it too. The thought enraged him—could he not be free of the boy *anywhere*?—and he stood up, halting the conversation. The team stared at him, their faces round with surprise.

"I need some sleep," he said, and he could feel their eyes on him as he made his way back to his room.

By the time he was at his door, fumbling with his key card, he felt as if he could sleep for the rest of the day. When the light blinked, he pushed open his door, spotting a small envelope halfway under his door. He frowned and bent to pick up the envelope, which bore the logo of the hotel.

Inside were two tickets to the ballet.

The front desk sent word that a sleigh would be waiting to take him to the theater, and did he need a suit for the performance? He did. The team had not expected to stay so long and he had not brought one, he told the pretty concierge at the marble counter. She smiled and made a discreet phone call, and later a tailor from one of the prestigious men's clothiers came to his room with a selection, carefully wrapped in plastic garment bags. Delacour chose a dark black

The driver of the horse-drawn sleigh said nothing more than "Good evening, sir," and "Enjoy your evening, sir," when they pulled up at the entrance to the theater in a driving, sideways snowstorm. A bright electric light streamed out through the snow onto the shallow stairs and the street. The fountain gleamed in a half circle, frozen in mid-spray. Skyscrapers loomed overhead, here and there a few windows were illuminated, and with the snow so thick it was as if they were suspended in mid-air.

The coachman rolled out a little step from the side of the sleigh and Delacour stepped down. No one looked at him as he headed toward the entrance, one ticket clutched in his gloved hand, the other in his pocket. He had not asked anyone to come with him—he did not think any of his teammates would want to come, and he knew they would not want to grieve for Albrecht by going to a ballet. He did know not why he went.

He checked his coat and showed his ticket to an usher who handed him a program and led him to his seat. The theater was nearly empty. He sat four rows back from the stage—he would have felt more comfortable in the upper balconies. In the orchestra pit, the musicians tuned up, their strings and woodwinds and horns sounding strange, disjointed tweaks and pips and long droning sounds that changed pitch mid-note. He leafed through his program, feeling like an imposter.

A dowager with scalloped white hair, jewels dripping from her ears and her gnarled fingers, sat right next to him. They were the only people in their section. She looked him over, raising one brow.

"Is your wife late?" she demanded, gesturing at the empty seat on his other side.

"No," he said. "She cannot be here tonight."

Too late he realized he spoke in French. The formidable woman softened, and she patted his hand. She replied in the same language. "You can tell her all about it when you see her again," she said. She turned to her own program, and Delacour was unaccountably cheered up.

The lights dimmed.

The curtain rose on a rustic peasant scene, the ballerinas in pretty bright skirts, the men wearing tights, billowy shirts, and sashes. Delacour sank into his seat, letting the music and the movement wash over him. It was pleasant—he did not have to concentrate. The program recapped the story anyway, so he could watch and disengage

Albrecht would have *hated* this, he thought, as the imposter Loys danced with the peasant Giselle. Don't take it so serious, the boy would have said. He would have laughed at Hilarion, who strutted his jealousy. Don't wear your heart on your sleeve. That made Delacour think of Cynthia, touching his sleeve to signal something. His shoulder twinged and he rubbed it restlessly.

I should call, he thought. She might need to talk to me. He would have to wait until the intermission though. He moved surreptitously to feel for his cell when he bumped the old lady next to him. She scowled and adjusted herself. Chastened, Delacour renewed his attention to the stage.

Giselle's boyfriend Hilarion came to the front of the stage. He carried a sword, but none of the other dancers watched him. They had just finished crowning Giselle Queen of the Harvest, but she was looking at Loys. The tableau froze behind Hilarion and the music faded away.

Hilarion sat down on the edge of the stage, one knee bent and the other hanging over the edge, and looked straight at Delacour.

"Well, you see my problem," he said, holding up the sword for

he was at the farthest edge of the stage. It wasn't supposed to be serious!

The dancers froze in another tableau, Loys-Albrecht at the far end of the stage, Hilarion in mute stubborn anger off to one side, the peasants surrounding the fallen body of their queen. Amid their unmoving forms, Giselle rose to her feet, her pale face and hands reflected in her white dress. Her hair and eyes were very dark. She fixed her gaze on Delacour.

"Oh," she said faintly. She hugged her elbows like a very young girl. "What happened?" She looked around.

Delacour felt a muscle jump in his cheek. His shoulder throbbed. "You're dead," he said flatly.

Tears shimmered in her eyes.

"I didn't mean to," she said. "It just happened." She ran back among the frozen dancers, touching first one, then the other. When she came to Hilarion she covered her face with her hands. "I can't bear it," she said. "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

"Yeah," Delacour said. "He loved you."

She laughed into her hands. When she raised her head her face was smeared with tears, but her expression was no longer that of a

Giselle collapsed in a cloud of white when she saw the sword and heard Hilarion's revelation. Loys, unmasked, became Count Albrecht.

Delacour to see. He gestured carelessly at the tableau behind him. "I know who he is."

Delacour turned around to see who the ballet dancer was talking to. The scattered patrons were transfixed by the stage.

"The question is, what do I say? Do I tell her, he's not who he says he is, and break her heart? Or do I let her fall in love with him, and let him break her heart?"

Delacour's mouth hung open. Finally daring to speak he said, "I don't think you're supposed to be talking."

Hilarion made a face. "They can't hear. The snow, the ice—we're all frozen inside here."

Delacour darted another look around. No one noticed them. Emboldened, he said, "Shouldn't she know the truth?"

Hilarion sighed. "She has a heart condition. It will kill her."

Delacour nodded. "Oh."

I wish I hadn't said that, Hilarion said.

Delacour thought he could relate to that. Telling Cynthia Albrecht was dead—would it be worse if it broke her heart, or if it didn't? "Yeah," he said heavily.

Hilarion turned to look behind him. "Look at him," he said. "He doesn't even care about her. She's just a stupid peasant girl to play with." He gave something like a laugh but the sound was ugly. "She *is* stupid. I'm well rid of her. I should tell her. Break her stupid little heart, just like she broke mine."

He leaped to his feet, a lithe unfolding of long muscular legs.

"Don't!" Delacour said quickly. The old lady elbowed him.

"Shhh!" she said. Confused, he looked from her to the stage, and she put a finger to her lips, shushing him angrily and then folding her arms across her chest. Delacour reddened and settled back into his seat. If any more ballet dancers spoke to him from the stage, he was determined to keep his mouth shut.

Giselle collapsed in a cloud of white when she saw the sword and heard Hilarion's revelation. Loys, unmasked, became Count Albrecht. He was pulled backward by his entourage, surprise and shock turning to anguish. But—but it was all supposed to be in fun, he said, dragged farther and farther away from Giselle until

frightened child. Her lips thinned, her chin narrowed. "Yes," she said. "He loved me, and he made it a crime that I did not love him." She swept her hand around at the stage. "Harvest Queen. That's me. Every year, Harvest Fucking Queen." She laughed again, looking around at the peasantry. "Some queen." She looked straight at Delacour. "You're on his side, because you think—all of you think—that just because you give us your love, we have to accept it." She pretended to open an imaginary present with mock surprise. "Oh! For me? The gift of your love. How sweet!" She threw it over her shoulder.

"So why Albrecht?" he said. He nodded his chin at the distant figure of Loys, impossibly far away on the stage—a prince in disguise, pretending to be a lowly peasant so he could seduce Giselle. Albrecht, pretending to be nothing but a rookie.

Giselle folded her arms across her chest and cocked her head. "Because when he looked at me," she said. "He saw *me*. And not the Harvest Queen." Movement caught Delacour's eye. Out of the wings came the silent *ballet blanc*. The women surrounded Giselle and she looked back at Delacour as they gathered her up.

"Just because you love her doesn't mean she *owes* you."

There was no message waiting for him on his cell when he checked at intermission.

In the heart of the city, with the silhouette of darkened skyscrapers rising all around, the park gleamed like a milky opal under the white light of the moon. Unbroken swaths of snow sloped gently among the trees and swept down to the frozen pond. The roads shone white, the paths where carriages, sleighs, and skis had traveled packed down tight. Delacour sat at the edge of the pond, his breath puffing out in front of him in the scant light from the moon and the yellow street lights. He banged the back of his skate against the ground, jamming his heel into the boot, and laced it up tight. Then he did the other one and stood, a big man on narrow blades of steel. Delacour hit the ice with one long stride and skated out into the center, filling his lungs with cold air, pushing hard and effortlessly

A snow halo clouded the moon, but the stars were clear The city lights were few, just enough to trace the outlines of the towers that rose against the night sky Delacour skated harder The wind whistled by his ears His head was bare and the cold wind tousled his hair, but he was warm enough

The cold felt good With every stroke his sleepiness drained away and his head cleared. He felt as if he could skate all night without tiring.

Someone else was on the ice, a still, shrouded figure. Delacour slid to a halt, sending ice into the air. It was Giselle She wore white furs now not sable Even in the cold her cheeks and lips were pale.

"I just want to know," she said "Do you still love her, after what she did?" Delacour looked around The *ballet blanc* waited in a half-circle around him, waif-like girls dressed in white clouds of fur. Their faces were all pale, their eyes in shadow. They looked like wolves

Their queen wore a crown of ice and her face glittered with triumph. He made a sound of recognition—she was the old woman who sat next to him

He slid back a little from the intensity of their gaze "That's none of your business," he said He pushed off, and they closed around him Delacour stopped abruptly, his skates sending up a small spray of ice "What do you want?" he demanded, braced to flee Slowly they began to walk around him, and he had to turn to keep facing Giselle

"To finish the dance," the old queen said from behind him, and he whipped around She lifted her narrow shoulders draped with lush sable. It was a young gesture, and it said. What else is there? There was only the ballet eternal—a lie revealed, a love betrayed, one heart broken

One young man danced to his death

Delacour looked straight at Giselle "Last night—you killed Albrecht."

Like the old queen, Giselle shrugged as she walked "And tonight. Hilaire." She eyed him obliquely, her eyes almond shaped in her narrow face "Judge me as you will, Delacour, but never forget—no matter the performance, *I always die*"

He had nothing to say

Giselle stepped close to him, and in spite of himself he breathed in her scent, the scent of snow and fur.

"I don't want any part of your damn play," he said, but his voice faltered

"Why do you get a choice?" she said.

She held out one small hand and put it against his chest and he took it, feeling the cold against his own warm, rough hands His skates felt heavy, rooting him to the ice Barely breathing, Delacour pulled her close, wanting to feel that cold against his lips, against him He bent his head to kiss her pale mouth, shuddering, for the cold was more than just the clean cold of snow. Her kiss was sweet and it shot straight through Delacour He cupped the back of her head, forgetting everything Forgetting, for the first time in months, Albrecht and Cynthia, as they must have kissed during their brief affair

Blood thundered in his head He felt his knees buckle and finally, only then, did Delacour struggle

"No!" With all of his strength he pushed Giselle off him She was more wolf now, her teeth and nose pointed, her eyes amber, her thin lips red Delacour staggered She smiled at him with reddened lips, but it was more like a snarl "Stay away," he said, and pushed back again, only to bump up against the rest of the women. One reached out and touched his chin with a long finger Delacour closed his eyes at her burning cold touch and tried to move away, but he was so weak he fell to his knees In the web of cracks in the clear black ice he could see a hazy shadow of himself, silhouetted by the moon

Someone knelt beside him Giselle She crouched in her cloud of white dress and furs, and lifted up his head by his forelock. "Don't take it so seriously," she whispered "It's what we do." She kissed his forehead and his heart beat slower

No, he said, but he did not say it out loud—instead, with his remaining strength he grabbed her hand and twisted it hard She gave a startled cry and jumped back, wide-eyed, for the moment almost human again. Delacour slumped to all fours but lifted his head and snarled at her. At his defiance, the wolf girls fell back

He had to stand He concentrated on that It took long moments, as if time had slowed along with his heart He concentrated on moving one skate, and he got that foot under him His arms trembled with the attempt to push himself to his feet, and his injured shoulder screamed with pain He welcomed it It meant he was alive, gave him energy He tried again and again to get his skates under him, until finally, shakily, he stood and faced the wolf girls, his arms wide

They hesitated, milling He looked at Giselle

"Maybe your life would have turned out better," he said, "if you had better taste in men"

With shrill screams they rushed him Delacour let himself slam into the ice under their charge and it split beneath his body with a tremendous crack.

He went under splashing and shuddering, knocking into thick slabs of ice as he flailed and gasped and sucked in icy water The water closed over his head and for a moment he looked through the greenish-black water roiling with his struggles at the watery crescent moon All around him he caught glimpses of white fur and dark hair thrashing in the water Then the moon began to retreat and he sank alone, drawn to the bottom by his skates.

He thought, *Cynthia*

Delacour breathed out ice water and pushed upward with tremendous effort His heart, at least, had started working again He reached for the surface, grappling for the edge of the ice bumping into the jagged broken edges that remained overhead His fingers slipped in the icy air and then he gripped the ice.

When he broke the surface he gasped at the pain of the cold air Ice coated his hair and his body—what water that was still fluid streamed off of him. He gasped and shuddered, trying to get air into his pained lungs He shook his head and stretched his arms as far as they would go digging into the rough ice for handholds.

He got himself out of the water that way, scraping for inches with his bloody fingers

Dawn came in pale streaks against the night sky It rose over Delacour as he walked out of the park covered in ice. He still wore his skates· the laces were frozen solid and his battered fingers plucked uselessly at them until he gave up the attempt. So he walked in them up the long drive in the park toward the main avenue fronted by the museums, stopping when he reached the street

In the early morning light he could hear the sound of water running and he looked around in blank surprise Asphalt glistened under streaming water, the only snow remaining in dirty patches by the gutters. Snowmelt dripped from the eaves of the stone buildings and ran down their fronts, staining the gray with dark streaks The chill air held a hint of warmth, as if the rising sun had strength to it for the first time in days, and it lay across his shoulders like a blessing. Behind him the park was still swathed in snow but it was receding fast, pocked with fallen icicles and broken twigs Somewhere in the woods a bird poured out its heart in greeting to the sun There was another rising noise, a distant murmur It took him a moment to identify it for what it was.

Traffic

A yellow taxi rolled out of the steadily brightening morning and pulled up next to him Delacour opened the door and got in, settling back into the warmth, letting it seep into his bones

As the taxi pulled away from the curb he thought he would try Cynthia when he got back to the hotel ❧

By Eric Baker

From tabletop to desktop, DDO ushers in a new era of role play.

ABOVE: Dreamblade *is a miniatures strategy game. RIGHT:* DDO *offers real time combat and surreal environments.*

The security of releasing a game with a loyal following is that the company knows there is a built-in audience that will buy it. The danger of releasing such a game is that the loyal following may rebel against the designer's vision of the franchise. Such is the case for Atari and Turbine Entertainment with ***Dungeons and Dragons Online: Stormreach***. They based their new MMORPG on the 3.5 version of the paper and dice *Dungeons and Dragons* rules and set it in the Eberron "campaign" world. On the one hand, this is the computer game that some *D&D* fans have been waiting half their lives to play. On the other hand, all of the pen-and-dice fans are going to come to the computer with expectations shaped by their experiences with their own play group.

Through the character creation process, *DDO* is very much like *D&D*. Players build their character using the familiar characteristics, classes, and races from the pen-and-paper version. Once a character is "rolled up," however, things diverge rapidly from the paper-and-dice game. For instance, instead of magic users having a limited number of spells memorized each day, they have a spell point pool. Magic users can cast the same spell as many times as they want as long as they have spell points to spend.

When players enter the game, there is another welcome and familiar touch: the voice of the Dungeon Master. For example, when a character gets close to a door, the game will make a listen check. If the character passes, text will show up in the middle of the display and a voice will say, "As you approach the door, you hear the sounds of clawed feet scraping on stone." This mechanic carries over the comforting feeling that there is a Dungeon Master keeping track of things even if there isn't someone sitting there with a screen and some dice.

Less familiar and comforting for paper and dice *D&D* players is going to be their first taste of combat. *DDO* is real-time combat. Players right click on enemies to attack. There is an auto attack function, but auto attacks have a lower chance of hitting. Hitting the shift key makes the characters block and

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other keys make them strafe/tumble to avoid attacks. While doing this, players are also hitting other keys to launch spells and/or special feats. *D&D* players who are accustomed to the tabletop game's turn-based combat and to debating the merits of each blow and spell with their party before finally rolling the dice are going to have to make a big adjustment.

Visually, the graphics, locations, and dungeons of *DDO* are great. The designers did the graphics in a very realistic style with a gritty/dirty feel. The game's art will delight most *D&D* players who have wanted to "see" the world in which they've been playing. A more mixed aspect of the game is the need to team in a balanced party to complete and survive the game's dungeons. Being a part of a group has always been a big part of the draw of *D&D*, but in a paper-and-dice environment the DM could fudge things to get any party mix through. *DDO* does allow for some flexibility in the party make-up, but don't leave the tavern without at least a thief and a cleric in the party.

No computer can yet match the flexibility of a human Dungeon Master, so fans can't expect *DDO* to be an accurate simulation of the paper-and-dice game. Considered instead as a computer game with a *D&D* background, *DDO* will be the answer to many paper and dice players' dreams.

Speaking of Wizards of the Coast properties, their newest collectible miniatures game is a fantasy-themed, battling monsters game called ***Dream Blade***. The players take the role of Dreamlords, powerful individuals who meet in a Dreamscape where they tap the powers of the unconscious mind to pit a huge variety of fantastic and science fictional monsters against one another. While the characters battle for power and prestige, the players compete to hone their skills for if/when they choose to compete in one of the 250 annual tournaments that Wizards is sponsoring. The yearlong tour will have a total prize budget of a half-million dollars and even the smallest tournaments will have $1,000 for the organizers to divide as they choose among the competitors.

Kameo: Elements of Power *is the newest fantasy release from Rare Ltd.*

The designers have focused the mechanics of *DB* on letting players spend more time playing and less time arguing about sight lines and ranges. Combat takes place on a map divided into squares. The game begins with all the monsters off the map. Each player rolls a six sided die. The winner goes first. The total of the two dice determines how many points worth of monsters each player can put onto the map. The designers rated the monsters so that on average players can bring in one powerful or two lesser monsters each turn. Each turn is two phases and in each phase a monster can move one square or fight. At the end of each round, the players collect points for the uncontested squares their monsters occupy.

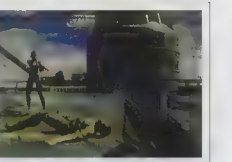
The heart of combat between the monsters is the custom dice that come with a starter set. Each die has a special face and if it comes up when the player makes a combat roll, it allows the player to activate a monster's special power, if applicable. The monsters' aspects affect the special powers—there are four and they also affect the cost of bringing monsters onto the map. Combat can result in no effect, the enemy monster being moved to anywhere on the map, or the enemy being removed from the game. In sum, the game is easy to learn and fast to play. Skill and a good "deck" of monsters are important to winning but there is enough randomness in the game to keep better players from automatically wiping the map with newbies.

Microsoft added some excitement to the holiday season by releasing their Xbox 360 game system, which turns out to be as beautiful a game console as has ever been produced. For one thing, all the controllers (up to four) are wireless, as is the media remote that is useful when owners want to use the 360 for playing DVDs or CDs or playing "media content" (mp3s, video files, etc) from their networked PCs. Better yet, you can turn the 360 itself on and off from any of the controllers. The 360 supports HD TVs, whether it is playing games or DVDs, the picture looks great. The only thing to be said against the 360 itself is that because of the heat its processors put out, it requires a fan that is noisier than people may be used to having in their living room.

Of course, the heart of any game console is the games themselves. Three of the current 360 titles have fantasy elements. The most overtly fantastic of these is ***Kameo: Elements of Power*** by Rare Ltd. and from Microsoft Game Studios, and the most striking part of the game is its beginning. *Kameo* is a single-player role-playing game, but it completely breaks the formula of such games by starting the player literally in the middle of the action with Kameo, the winged elf princess who is the game's hero, already in command of a big chunk of her destined power. For players who are tired of starting epic adventures with a character who is armed with only (metaphorically) a sharp stick, Kameo is their game.

The background of the game is that Kameo's family rules the Enchanted Kingdom by virtue of their ability to tame various elemental creatures and then transform into them when needed. Kameo was next in line to inherit the elementals, a fact that so angered her sister that the sister teamed up with the troll king and kidnapped the rest of her family. Unfortunately for the sister, she left Kameo behind and the game begins with the princess, armed with three elemental forms, mounting a full-scale assault on the troll castle. The assault ultimately fails and Kameo has

A new release from White Wolf, World of Darkness Chicago, raises the bar for horror-based rpg's.



to literally go back to square one. Literally because that failure results in Kameo waking up without any elementals and the player then having to lead her through the tutorial levels, levels that would have been first in nearly any other game of this type. It's weird, since by the time players are being taught the game's mechanics, they've already played such an action-packed level that the player already knows 90 percent of what they're being taught.

In actual game play, *Kameo* is fun. The designers managed to combine puzzle solving with combat in the way that many of the better side-scrolling games have, but without making either the puzzles or the combat full of impossible twitch elements. Working with this is the fact that while Kameo eventually has ten different elementals she can transform into, each of those elementals only has four or five powers so that the player is never overwhelmed with too much to track at once. It is a great looking game that is fun and challenging to play, players will just need a little patience with the beginning.

Also for the Xbox 360, but at the other end of the spectrum, control wise, is ***Dead or Alive 4*** by Team Ninja and from Tecmo. This fighting game is the next installment of Tomonobu Itagaki's saga of Ninjutsu vs. super science featuring his recurring cast of martial artists, ninja, and wrestlers. The evil DOATEC has at last birthed its long-sought super soldier and the Mugen Tenshin clan has declared all-out war on the corporation. The game tells this plot through various cut scenes spaced between the matches in the game's story mode, along with several B and C plots about the characters, relationships and rivalries.

Team Ninja has long produced some of the best looking games on the market, and *DOA4* is no exception. Nowhere in video games are human figures portrayed as dynamically and cleanly. Hair flows, clothing ripples. The backgrounds are detailed and full of movement. The stages have levels and many contain breakables. A street fight level contains passing cars that will hit the fighters, knocking them into the air. There are lots of unlockable costumes and characters, and the online system from *DOA Ultimate* is carried forward and expanded.

All in all, *DOA4* is the probably the best game of its genre on the market . . . with the huge caveat that just like Team Ninja's *Ninja Gaiden* game from 2004, players with any doubts about their reflexes should definitely rent before they buy. In a previous version of *DOA* it was possible, if time consuming, to button mash through the story mode by setting the difficulty on easy. *DOA4* doesn't allow this. Players who can't perform at least some combinations and reverses will be shut out from the majority of the game's content and all of its unlockables.

A third Xbox 360 game is ***Perfect Dark Zero*** by Rare Ltd. and from Microsoft. The game is a sequel to an old Nintendo 64 game, but there is no need to have played that game

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to enjoy this one. In the single-player mode, players take the role of Joanna Dark. She and her father are nominally high tech bounty hunters (the game is set in a cyberpunky near-future), but the plot has less to do with Joanna and her father stalking bad guys than it does giving them excuses to travel around the world and engage in a wide variety of gun fights.

Like all the 360 games, *PDZ* looks great particularly on an HD TV. The muzzle flash the figure deformations, the way the glass shatters, and the parts of the background that break are all on par with the better first-person games on PCs. The game gives a good "feel" to firing the various weapons, particularly in the two-gun modes where the left and right triggers fire the left and right guns respectively. In addition, there are unique things like the cover mechanic that lets the player set Joanna up behind an obstacle and then have her lean out to shoot in relative safety. Makes a nice alternative to the circle strafe tactics that rule most shooters.

For fans of shooters and action games, and for fans looking for a more adult game experience than *Kameo* that is much easier to control than *DOA4*, *PDZ* is an excellent choice.

Dungeons & Dragons sparked the paper-and-dice role-playing game industry. *Vampire the Masquerade* sparked two of that industry's genres, story-based and horror-based RPGs. The first standout supplement for *VM*, the one that set the bar for what a supplement to a story-based RPG should be, was *Chicago by Night*. Each time White Wolf, the publisher, has revised and updated the *VM* rules, they have also felt the pressure to push that bar higher with a new edition of their *Chicago* supplement. The latest one is called simply ***World of Darkness Chicago*** and it is for use with all the latest editions of White Wolf's story based RPGs: *Vampire: The Requiem*, *Werewolf: The Forsaken*, and *Mage: The Awakened*.

This edition is 422 pages of background and setting about the Second City. It has a prolog, an introduction, a history of Chicago in the World of Darkness, and then three separate sections, one section for each game. The designers divided each game section into three chapters. The first is a recent history of the particular monsters in the city, the second is a rogues' gallery of important characters in that monster's particular subculture, and the third is a story of what might be going on in the city with those monsters as the players enter the story. The book includes not only maps and an index, but also provides suggested stats for all the characters in the rogues' galleries.

The scale of the game that this supplement makes possible is terrific, and the book is almost as entertaining to read as it is to play, but Game Masters and players will have the most fun if they take the advice given by the designers and keep the focus on the players and the characters around them. That said, *WoDC* gives the players lots of room to find their place and people ❧

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Schwarze Madonna

Continued from page 69

remembered all too well when he'd dug up the sword

"They can call me anything they want," he answered "I will plow the fields and plant the grain and gather good things from the land. There are fallow fields aplenty here for others, since the war has come and gone and taken the people with it "

"And there will soon be enough of us to hold it against comers "

A breeze eddied against the prevailing wind, a comment from the ghostly retinue

"Even the spirits follow you," Milese added "You carry peace "

"Not in my heart " Robert's love for the Black Madonna burned within him to the point where he simply wanted to lay by the trail and weep "Perhaps I should have taken Prospero's head "

In silence they looked at the grave, Robert's last turning of the earth was still evident in the straggled late season growth

"You would not have it any better now."

"No "

He laid the blade and bag down and set to work with the shovel. The pounding in his heart made it nearly impossible to dig, but Robert would not ask a one-handed man for help, especially not in this

Milese sat in the sun and watched, more silent than ever If Robert was the Farmer King, then the soldier was his chancellor Most folk already came to Milese first letting Robert's near-oldest friend present questions and causes for discussion Only the boys still took him for who he truly was—a farmer with a sword But they kept themselves apart, walking as scouts or speaking unarmed to frightened crofters and townsfolk who fled the approach of armed men in the company of ghosts that could now be seen even in daylight

Nights they sat by their own fire and discussed fate with their mother, who had remained with them

Eventually he dug to the Black Madonna's body. It was as incorrupt as he remembered As he feared

What would happen when he placed the head into the grave?

Would she rise up whole and step into the circle of his love?

Would she rise up angry and take his own head in trade?

Or would she simply walk away, never having known him for who he was and what he had done?

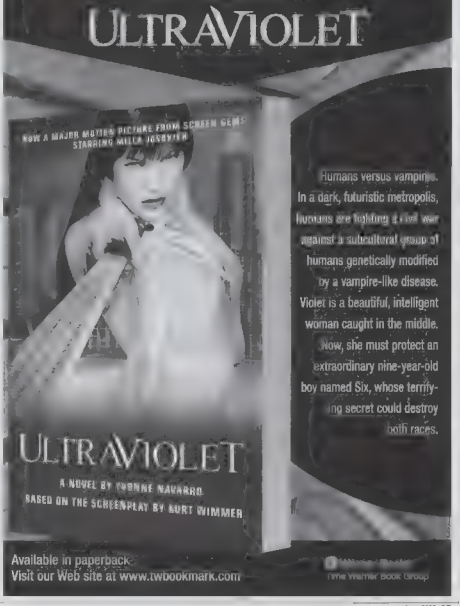
"I have crossed mountains and forests for the love of you," Robert said quietly, the bag in his hand. "I have fought and killed for the love of you. Someday I will die of the love of you Make your choices as you will

He drew her head from Prospero's bag, bloody as the day it was cut, and leaned down to lay it in the grave atop the body, careful to set her blade next to her The old braid slipped from his wrist then, to tumble into the grave

There was a swirling, a stirring, as if the greatest of ghosts had come upon them The air beat with the spread of great wings, and the scent of roses flooded him until his eyes ran with tears She blinked, looked at him, smiled once, then collapsed to dust which streamed from the grave to rise into the pale frosted sky in a column of motes glowing gold in the sunlight Her sword rusted to dust beside her, and the soil of the grave folded itself inward, collapsing to a mound from which a rosebush pushed upward

Ah," said the Farmer King, and cried a while for the miracle that had not come.

Eventually Milese led him back to his steading, from where he ruled for many years, playing a part in settling the age-old war between Sun and Moon In time his lands became known as the Hill Gardens, his trading town grown to be the City of the Rising Sun Robert the Brown acquired other titles and epithets —but always first the Farmer King Though many came to abide with him Robert never took lover nor wife, and spent most of the afternoons of his life speaking to the deep red rosebush at the top of what had once been his best field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Robin of the Green

Continued from page 38

leaves overhead, the pain was written clear on both of their faces. Ages of summer stood between them—two little boys, lost amid the vastness of the world, each needing a friend more than the other could know.

"I locked Marion in the tower. She is to be beheaded tomorrow at dawn."

Guy's words blew as cold as the morning breeze. Robin lifted his eyes to look at the tower where the light had burned all night long and burned now still. His gaze shifted to the far end of the castle, where the light was now extinguished.

"You will only hurt her, like all the rest."

Guy's words were barely a whisper and Robin turned. His gold-brown eyes offered no defense. He was naked among the green.

"It is in your nature ..." He began and stopped, then bowed his head, taking a deep breath and beginning again.

"Once, you helped a young boy and were kind to him when he had no other friend in the world. And I *do* believe in redemption. I believe a man can change."

"And a god?" Robin whispered.

Guy's gaze did not waver, then after a moment he moved his hands to unbelt the sword he wore at his side. He held it out, flat on the palms of his hands, then lay it down at Robin's feet. Above the scabbard Robin could see a jewel, as green as summer-shaded eyes, gleaming in the sun. Guy stepped back and turned, speaking over his shoulder.

"The guard will be weak at the west side of the courtyard. There are those in the surrounding towns who still keep to the old ways. With a few good men at his side, a man could mount a daring rescue and sweep a young maiden away. Such a man, if he were especially skilled, could hide in the woods—disappear."

Guy took a step then paused, turning to glance at Robin over his shoulder. His eyes were haunted and sad.

"With her at your side, you would live like outlaws, as criminals, always on the run. You are used to that, Robin, but it will be a hard life for Marion."

A long silence stretched between them and both faced the tower and the window, burning its light high in the wall.

"Do you love her?" Robin whispered.

"What do I know about love?" A smile touched Guy's lips and as he turned, it was echoed on Robin's, solemn and sad. Then after a moment, Robin's grin became mischievous again.

"The west wall?" Fox-light glittered in Robin's eyes and though shadows hollowed Guy's cheeks and darkened the green in his own gaze, he nodded, the same sad smile still touching his lips.

"The west wall." ❧

A Better Place

Continued from page 61

"What for? You ain't a movie star, are you? I've seen lots of movies and you weren't in any of them."

"No, not a movie star. But I know some."

That got Russ's attention. He dropped his resistance and gazed at the stranger with newfound admiration. "Movie stars! Which ones you know?"

"Oh, lots of them. There are more than a few where I come from."

"Hollywood? Lots of stars there."

"No, someplace better."

"Where?"

"Nowhere in particular."

"You're just pulling my leg, ain't you?" Russ's shoulders dropped and Clayton thought he looked like a dog that had been offered a bite of rib eye but instead got a kick in the flank.

"Listen," said the man, his smile never wavering. "I heard you saying you wanted to go someplace better than here. That's true, isn't it?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, I'm here to take you."

Clayton wasn't sure he liked the tall stranger and he attempted to stand as straight as possible, so the man might know he was a bit older and wiser in the ways of the world. "Take him where?" he asked, wishing their parents would get back from town.

"A better place," said the man, as if that explained everything. The sand had moved in, causing Clayton's eyes to run and his nose to itch, but the stranger seemed unaffected.

"But where," said Clayton, becoming exasperated.

"A better place. A place where movie stars live next door and you don't have to feed chickens. A place where there's oceans and mountains and not a single grain of sand. A place where the cotton jumps right off the plant and onto the truck."

"What else?" Russ stared directly at the man's eyes, as if he were trying to see the place he was describing.

"What's you favorite thing to eat, Russ?"

Clayton did not remember telling the man their names and when he spoke Russ's; a nervous lump settled in his stomach beside the gas from the root beer.

"Peach cobbler. But the kind Mama makes, not the kind Old Lady Grubb brings to the church lunches."

"Well, that's wonderful," said the man, looking pleased. "*Everything* where I come from tastes like peach cobbler."

"Even the vegetables," asked Russ, hopefully.

"They would, except we don't have vegetables."

Clayton didn't believe what the man was saying, but the place was starting to sound pretty good to him anyway. The fields and the animals were no longer visible, and now the three of them stood alone in a world of soft, brown light. Clayton reached back and grabbed the porch rail, needing a bit of reality to hold onto as the man spun his lies. He wished the sandstorm would go away and take the stranger with it.

"And you don't have to wear your Sunday clothes," he continued. "And although you may not appreciate it now, you never have to worry about anything. You have all the money and medicine you need, and you can buy anything you want."

"Can I sleep 'till ten o'clock?" asked Russ, testing the man.

"You can sleep until eleven if you want. Nobody's going to wake you up. We don't worry about chores there."

"Where is this place?" asked Clayton. He was becoming worried about the faraway look in his brother's eye.

"No place in particular, just past the sand."

"Let's go," said Russ. "That sounds like the kind of place I want to be."

"You can't go there, Russ. There ain't no such place." Clayton's heart was pounding in his chest. He felt nervous and light-headed in the thick, sandy air, and he gripped the porch rail tighter, afraid he might suddenly feel compelled to leave too.

"You're wrong about that, son," said the stranger. He didn't seem to mind that Clayton had called him a liar. His smile widened and he crouched down so that he was looking up at the boys. "Why don't you come along and see. You're both welcome, and you can come back anytime you want. You just have to blow in with the sand."

"I don't think Daddy would be too happy to come home and find out we ain't here."

"Well, nobody's going to keep you there. You get tired of bumping elbows with the movie stars and riding in rocket ships, you come on home."

"Rocket ships!" said Russ, bursting with impatience. "You stay here if you want, Clayton. I'm going."

"Shall I lead the way?" asked the stranger, rising to his feet and shaking the sand from his suit jacket.

"You bet," said Russ.

Without another word, the stranger began walking away, Russ in step right behind him. Clayton wanted to say something, wanted to grab his brother and tackle him, hold him there until he saw reason but he did none of these things. He watched the brown cloud envelop his brother as he followed a stranger in search of something more. Before disappearing entirely, Russ's voice called back. "I'll be home soon. I just want to have a look."

It was the last time Clayton had seen his brother.

Now, nearly seventy years later, Clayton sat on the same aging porch, watching the sand approach, wondering what became of Russ. He still pictured him as he'd looked that day, hands and face burned an earthy

brown by the unchallenged Texas sun, hair a rusty blonde, headstrong and young in his wrinkled church clothes. After decades of consideration, Clayton preferred to believe the happiest of all possible scenarios. Russ had found his better place, a place of eternal youth, free from hardship and the unwieldy weight of adult responsibility.

The sand reached John, causing him to put down his hoe and tie a blue bandana over his mouth and nose. Satisfied, he went back to work and soon vanished from Clayton's sight. Clayton smiled, recognizing one of the reasons that made him happy he'd stayed behind that day. Sometimes life was expensive, but damned if it didn't pay you back a hundredfold.

Clayton rose to his feet and clenched the worn porch rail with one thin hand. He felt the warm air whip the sand around him, returning him once again to that world of dull, brown light, and a childhood memory of singular circumstance. He closed his burning eyes, wondering as he always did if Russ would blow in with the sand, busting with tales of peach cobbler and other sources of adolescent bliss. Maybe when he opened his eyes, he'd see his brother. Maybe Russ and the sandman would be standing there, ready to offer him one more chance to come along.

Clayton was pretty sure he'd still have to pass. ❧

Pavel Petrovitch

Continued from page 47

He is really gone?" the older one asked, and then started jabbering to the other one they looked scared, though not of me.

"Did you skin him, you sick bastards?"

The older one looked at me like I was crazy. "We didn't do this. He did this. It was his magic."

Then the siren sounded and the guards came to lock us down.

THEY LOOKED FOR PAVEL PETROVICH all day. They checked the camp from top to bottom. They found a lot of shit—dope stashes, weapons—but not him.

Funny, but they never questioned anyone. Not me, not the natives, not Constantin. They looked for a day, and then pretended the whole thing never happened. Someone told me they burned the skin and recorded Pavel Petrovich as having died of TB.

No one could have told them anything of use, anyway. Just how he wanted the tattoos and how the savages danced. I could have told them about the wolf I saw later, but what was the point?

I saw it the next night. I was standing by the fence just before lights out, looking out at the birches, when I saw it trotting through the trees. It moved parallel to the west side of the camp, maybe two hundred yards out. I had never seen a wolf out here. There used to be a bounty on them, and most had been shot or driven away. So I followed along to the corner of the camp. When I got there, it turned and ran along the north side of the camp.

It seemed like it was waiting for me, and I started feeling dizzy. Still, I followed it to the corner, down the east side, and finally across the south side, where it paused. I swear it was looking at me.

Maybe not. Maybe I was the only one look-

MAYBE HE'S NOT A MAN ANYMORE, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN HE'S LESS THAN A MAN.

ing. Maybe it didn't even know I was there, or if it did, it didn't recognize me. But I was dizzy, and my heart was pounding, and I remember thinking, *Maybe he's not a man anymore but that doesn't mean he's less than a man.*

Then the wolf ran off, disappeared into the birches, heading east, out beyond the beyond. ❧

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BOOKS

Continued from page 33

example, while others breathe fire—a battle involving dragons is as much a cerebral as a physical affair. There are a number of engagements thrillingly described, building toward a confrontation on the order of the final battle in Bakker's novel (though Novik is not yet Bakker's equal when it comes to large-scale military actions).

Novik's straightforward plot holds few surprises, but her flair for language and character lifts *His Majesty's Dragon* above the ordinary. And if you like this one, you won't have long to wait for the next; indeed, the whole trilogy may already be in print by the time you are reading this. In an untried strategy for which Novik is serving as guinea pig, Del Rey is publishing the trilogy in monthly installments. I hope she will not suffer for it.

A Shadow in Summer, Daniel Abraham, TOR, New York, hardcover, 336 pp, $24.95, ISBN: 0-765-31340-5

I've been an admirer of Daniel Abraham's short fiction for some time, but even so, the excellence and originality of his debut novel took me by surprise. *A Shadow in Summer* is the first of a quartet of fantasies set in a world that seems derived as much from the portrait of medieval Japan, with its strange mix of refined decadence and casual brutality, painted so memorably in Murasaki Shikibu's classic *Tale of Genji* as it is from the baroque far futures of Jack Vance and M. John Harrison. Magic in this world is wielded through the creative power of poets who bind metaphors into fleshly forms called "andat" that gain consciousness, intelligence, and supernatural abilities commensurate with their ideational origins and the personalities of the poets who express and bind them. The andat at the heart of Abraham's story is called Seedless, from its ability to abort the process of generation, a power it puts to use in the service of the ruler of the city of Saraykhet, an oasis of culture surrounded by barbaric enemies kept at bay only by fear of the andat. Seedless nurtures an instinctive hatred for the poet that harnessed it, a drunkard named Heshai, and this animosity drives a plot of Byzantine complexity and treachery, much of which takes place in the shadows, by misdirection and implication, under a veneer of studied politeness. Abraham's literary style is aptly evoked by his invented culture, in which stylized gestures and postures have been elaborated into a wordless language capable of the subtlest nuances of meaning. Swept up unknowingly in Seedless's plan are Heshai's apprentice, Maati, a laborer named Itani, who is not what he seems, and a woman, Liat, who loves both men. The inner lives of these characters and others are conveyed with precision and feeling, and out of their hopes and heartbreaks Abraham limns a tragedy of quietly devastating impact. ❧

TELEVISION

Continued from page 12

the world, and you have to find people who are capable of portraying them accurately and also have a strong resemblance. So the casting effort to find these people—specifically in Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin and Ricky Nelson and Roy Orbison and Buddy Holly—was a worldwide search led by Lisa Freiberger, our marvelous casting director back in Los Angeles. And we found them all over the world. Our Janis Joplin is from Canada, Elvis and Ricky are from America, and Roy and Buddy are from Australia. We did a great deal of research on the look and the temperament and the history of the characters, and the physical, speech patterns, carriage—all of those things became terribly important. There's a point in the story where [husband and wife] Clark and Mary come to realize that these aren't just play actors in a tourist attraction. So you needed a pretty close portrayal."

"You Know They Got a Hell of a Band" is a tricky story because it combines humor and horror. On one hand, it's a story that can be played purely for laughs. On the other hand, it can be terrifying while still keeping a sense of humor. "The challenge was to find the right tone," Robe says. "It's one of these wonderful King pieces where there are times where you don't know whether it's OK to laugh. You're uncomfortable, and there's a chill running up your spine, and you don't know if that's OK or not, and I love that about his work, particularly in this piece. There are moments when it's just simply funny, and there are other moments when it's scary, and there's no reason it can't be both.

"Steven Weber is absolutely wonderful in the role of Clark. He found just the right colors of a retrograde guy who's more comfortable in a different time and place and refuses to budge from that mind-set. He likes one type of music and one style of clothes, and everything is going to be OK no matter what happens as long as he stays within the world as he construes it, which was safe. And he won't change. He's married to a person who needed him to change and grow up, and thus the conflict of the story."

Whether *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* is a one-shot miniseries or the beginning of an ongoing series depends on many factors, beginning with the ratings. It's a decision that lies in the hands of executive producer Haber, TNT, and King himself.

"It's been a fantastic experience," Hayes says. "I've been doing this almost 30 years, and this would have to be right at the top as far as being a wonderful experience."

Robe adds, "Our greatest goal is for Stephen to be happy, and so far his reaction is very positive. He likes all the films that he's seen so far. Our first goal is to please Stephen King, and we feel if we accomplish that mission, the rest of the world awaits." ❧

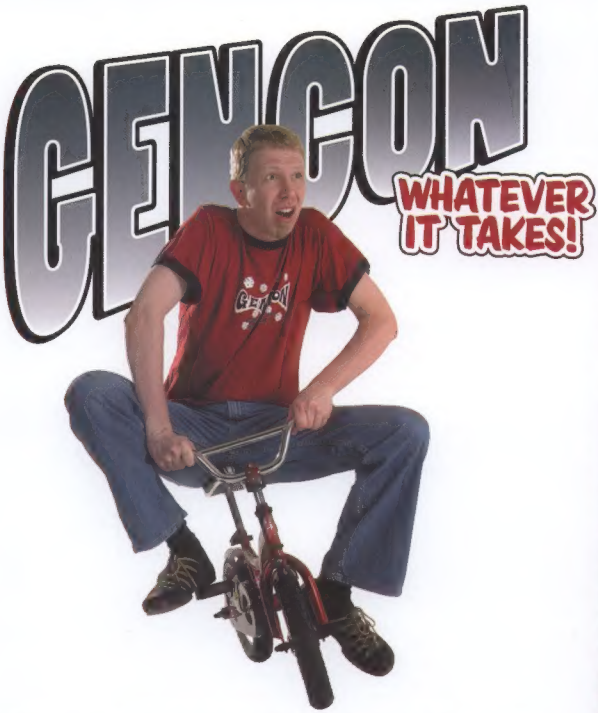
FOLKROOTS

Continued from page 26

or strap, made from the skin of a wolf or a hanged man, that can transform the wearer at will (which is what Stubbe claimed the Devil gave him), the magical ointment that also gives transformative power, day or night: the werewolf that, as in Marie de France's *Bisclavret*, cannot change back unless he has access to his clothing, the excommunicated wanderer cursed with werewolfism by a wrathful saint or priest: these strange and fruitful images no longer ring any bells. Shockingly enough, it has been suggested that the reason why the full moon, goddess of our tradition, originally featured in werewolf stories is an upsettingly simple one: in an age before street lights, you needed a bright moon to see the transformation take place. Nothing more.

We make of traditions what we can. Dogs fill me with a phobic terror; my friends will tell you that I'll hide behind them to avoid a Pekinese. When I sat in the safari park though, gazing through the car window at the long legged, white-ruffed pack that trotted to and fro outside, I felt no fear of them, nothing but an interested admiration for their beauty. Their eyes were clear and alert, their coats were thick, they were practically *fluffy*. Yet something about these creatures got people spooked, even before the trials, even aside from the fact that they were a lot more dangerous to a medieval villager than to me, safely ensconced in a vehicle. I remember being a child, thrilling to my father's stories of the ancient Greek superstition that if the wolf saw you before you saw it, you would be struck dumb.

The thing about wild beasts is that they aren't evil. It isn't evil that makes them dangerous, savage, and able, under the right circumstances, to rip apart those who cross their paths. That's just how wild beasts work. The stories of the Inquisition fascinated me, and as I wrote of werewolves, it seemed to me more and more that it had to be part of the story. A witch burner is a far more frightening creature than a canine. But at the same time, the black-and-white morality of the tales, the evil monster or the poor tragic hero, came to seem simplistic—and whenever you look at morality, simplistic thinking is dangerous. That's how people wind up on the rack. And in any situation where there is power at stake and people are frightened of each other, there are bound to be wrongs on both sides. We are, after all, animals, clever ones, but flesh and blood like all the rest. Rather than writing the traditional post Inquisition fable of the bestial outsider that threatens society, I chose to write something different, something closer to the birthplace of the myth: the bestial society that threatens the outsider. After all, do we really need to look for the inner beast? If you want to find an animal, all you have to do is look down—there's one standing in your shoes. ❧



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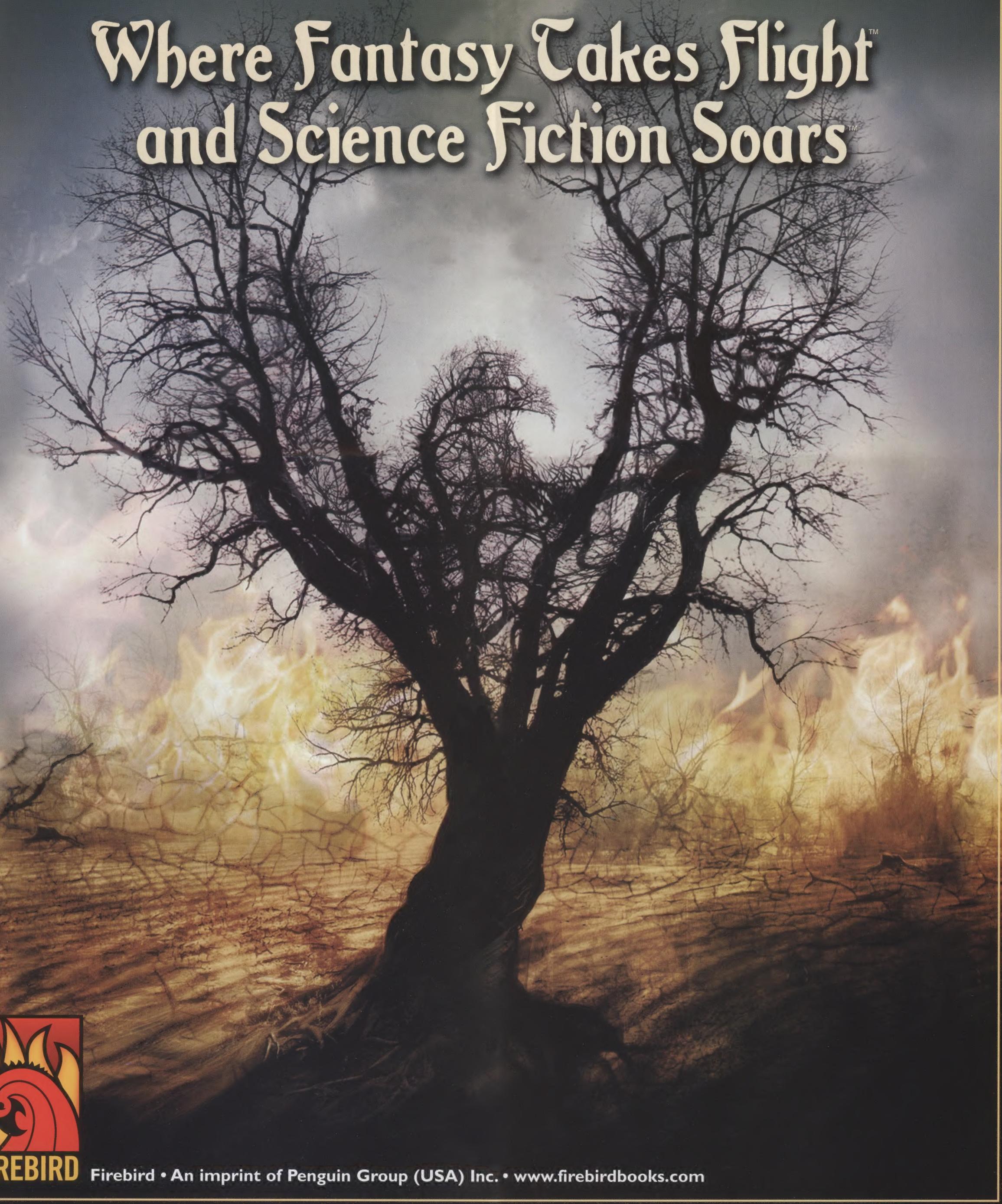

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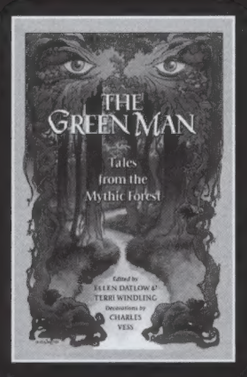

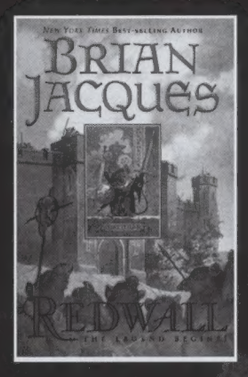

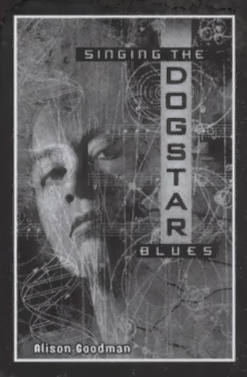

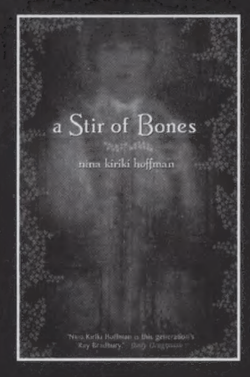

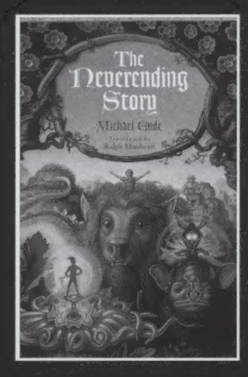

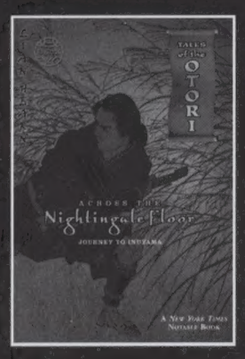

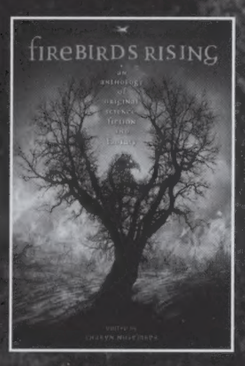

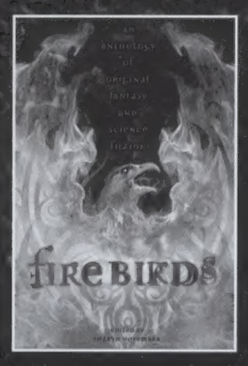

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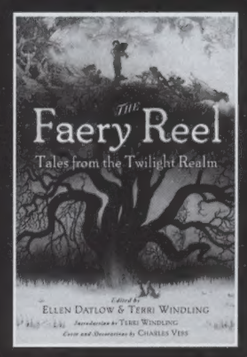

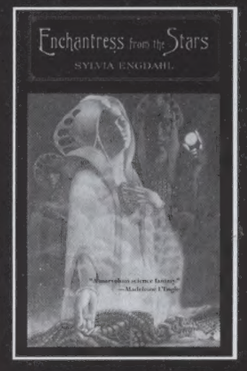

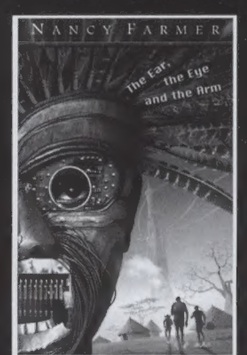

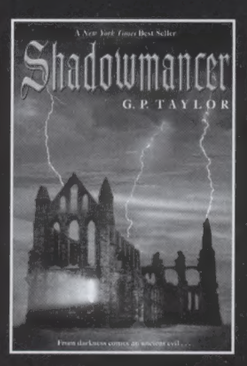

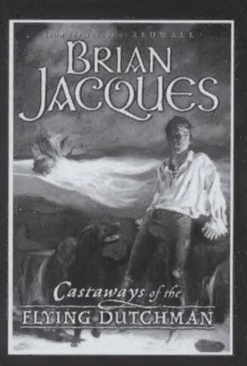

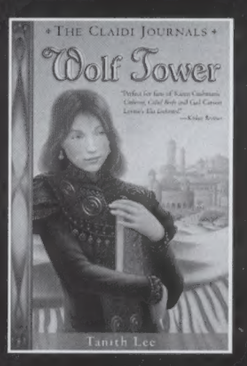

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